

An Overview of the Leadership and Development of the Age to Come in the United States: 1832-1871

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I. INTRODUCTION

The rise and fall of William Miller's Adventist fervor coincided with the equally passionate ministry of Alexander Campbell in the eastern and southern states of America. Campbell, joined by Barton Stone, preached restoration to primitive gospel and Christian Unity. They had little to do with William Miller or any of his followers, although they did not shy away from teaching and preaching the second advent of Christ.

It is the purpose of this paper to examine the interaction of some of the articulate religious leaders of the day, particularly as they interacted with Dr. John Thomas, a British citizen, who defined the Gospel as things concerning the Kingdom of God, especially as the promises to Abraham were fulfilled.

Thomas joined the Campbell-Stone movement but was eventually thrust from it. He made friends with an ex-Millerite, Joseph Marsh, and together they studied the Age to Come. Marsh had first heard of Age to Come from Elias Smith of the Christian Connection, who published the *Herald of Gospel Liberty* which he began in 1808.

Dr. Thomas eventually formed a denomination which he named the Christadelphians, meaning, "Brethren of Christ." We are interested in this group because the teachings of Dr. Thomas were so closely aligned with the teachings of Joseph Marsh in New York and Benjamin Wilson in Illinois.

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We are also interested in examining the struggles between Dr. Thomas and proponents of the Age to Come doctrine, the Adventists and to some extent, the British Campbellites.

After the Bitter Disappointments

There were two Bitter Disappointments arising from the date setting which William Miller and his followers promoted in the early 1840s in New England and the eastern seaboard. When Christ did not return in 1843, Miller's theologians scrambled to explain it; they did so by setting another date the following year. When Christ still did not return, there was a lot of explaining to do to all the disenchanted Adventists. This history is common knowledge among church historians of American religious history, hence, we do not elaborate upon it.

The drama which arose in the aftermath of the two Bitter Disappointments in 1843 and 1844, not only played out in the Millerite movement, what was left of it, but also in several splinter groups which departed from it. The history of the aftermath is also somewhat familiar to church historians.

During the fifteen or so years after the break-up of the Millerite movement, several well-known leaders emerged who eventually led their followers into denominational formation.

Among those theologians were James and Ellen White who preached the "cleansing of the sanctuary" to explain why Jesus had not returned in 1844. In essence they said Jesus had moved from one heavenly apartment to another to better prepare for his second advent.

Another leading theologian, George Storrs, believed in the Second Advent, in conditional immortality and annihilation of the wicked. He had popularized the doctrine of conditional immortality through his famous "Six Sermons," which Miller had incorporated into his movement.

Continuing to carry the banner for the Millerite movement, Joshua Himes preached the Second Advent message as Miller had popularized it. It should be noted that this message did not include any element dealing with the restoration of the Jews to their homeland. In fact, Miller and Himes repudiated anything having to do with this doctrine, which they called "Judaism."

Ellen White's teachings and visions led the way for the development of the 7th Day Adventists; George Storrs, the Life and Advent Union; and Joshua Himes, the Evangelical Adventists, which by 1860 splintered into the

Advent Christians. The latter group is considered to be the predominate heirs of the Millerite following and doctrine.¹

II. JOSEPH MARSH IN THE FOREFRONT

Little known among church historians in America is Joseph Marsh. Marsh was to step out of the background of the Millerite movement into the foreground of the Age to Come movement.

As a religious leader, Marsh was not a totally obscure person, but little has been written about him in comparison to the other leaders. Prior to the rising star of the Millerite movement, Marsh edited and published the *Christian Palladium* for the Christian Connection. He moved from that publication to the Millerite movement by editing and publishing *The Voice of Truth* for William Miller. While the *Voice of Truth* was the voice of the Millerite movement, Marsh might be said to have been a Millerite, in as much as he had leaned away from the Christian Connection and leaned toward Miller.

After the Bitter Disappointments, however, *The Voice of Truth* became the voice of Joseph Marsh. Through it, he promoted the unique doctrine of Age to Come as well as the social issues of temperance and abolition.² The Adventists, as Miller's followers were called, did not like the Age to Come teaching because it taught the restoration of Jews to their homeland prior to Jesus' second advent. Marsh was rapidly becoming an unpopular person.

Marsh used a widely publicized conference at Albany, New York in April 1845, as his opportunity to publicly indicate he was making a break with William Miller. Marsh did this by not attending the conference. The Albany Conference was an attempt by the Adventist leaders to hold the movement together.

There were other leaders who also did not attend the Albany Conference, including James White, Joseph Bates, and George Storrs. These leaders wished to launch out in faith, without the baggage of the Millerite movement to hold them back.

¹ Clyde E. Hewitt, *Midnight and Morning*. Advent Christian General Conference: Charlotte, N.C., 1983, 264.

² LeRoy Edwin Froom, *The Prophetic Faith of Our Fathers: Vol. IV*. Review and Herald: Washington, D.C., 1954, 901.

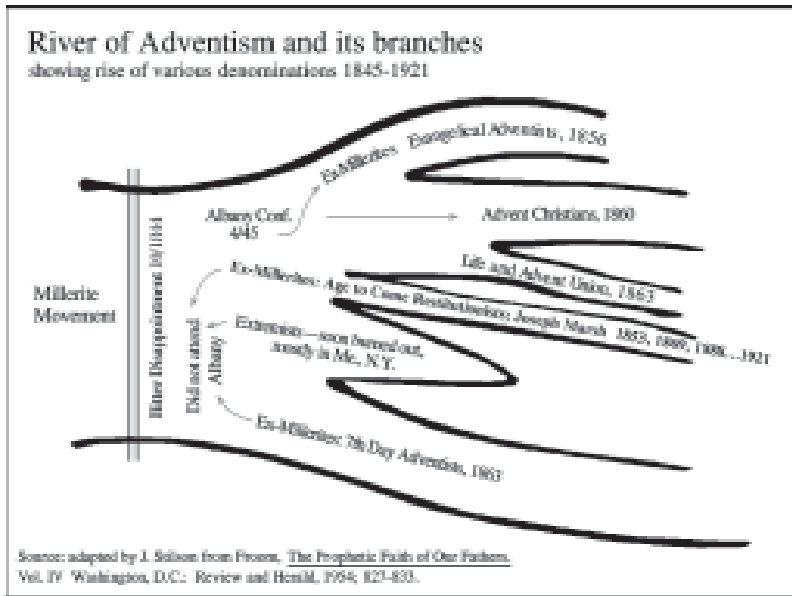


Figure 1: Froom accounts for three branches coming out of the Millerite movement. He does not include the Age-to-Come Restitutionists which actually is a fourth branch.

The Development of Denominations

Figure 1 shows the development of denominational branches, which sprang from the root of the Millerite movement. Men whose faith had been severely challenged by the “failure” of Christ to return upon the appointed dates scrambled to make sense of it. Some fell away; some turned to orthodox denominations to heal their wounds, others forged ahead trying to make sense of a spiritual catastrophe.

Several prominent Adventist-preaching denominations were born before the century was over, including the Evangelical Adventists, 1856; the Advent Christians, 1860; and the 7th Day Adventists, 1863. The Age to Come Restitutionists, who did not prefer being called Adventist, also organized briefly in 1853.

Figure 1 is adapted from comments by Froom.³ He has given quite a bit of space and a fairly comprehensive account of those troubled years in volume four of *The Prophetic Faith of our Fathers*. While Froom mentioned Joseph Marsh in light of Adventists, he did not do extensive analysis

³Ibid., 828-844.

of Marsh's impact upon the post-Millerite era. His goal was not to write a history of the Age to Come movement, and so he has left it to us to do.

The Development of Thought

This is not an easy history to write. One reason for this is because it involves telling the story in a chronological sequence which ideally should agree with the chronologies of other historians, although sometimes the times and events don't seem to mesh. However, the history must also detail a study of topical questions, with analysis of the history of thought from that period.

The chronology involves tracking the movements of at least three leaders, Marsh, Wilson and Thomas, over several decades in three locations in the United States and Britain.

The topics generated by their interaction must be examined from each man's point of view, yet these men did not arrive at their understandings overnight. So some attempt to trace the development of thought must also be addressed.

Joseph Marsh is an example. His journey from Christian Connection to Millerites, to the Age to Come, back to Christian Connection and back to the Age to Come is a winding road and difficult to follow. His beliefs not only changed from the early days of the *Voice of Truth*, but his language and ways of expressing himself changed with his new understandings.

Dr. John Thomas also may be seen to develop in his thoughts and career. He came from a British Baptist background, gravitated to the Campbellites in the United States, investigated the Millerite movement but rejected it, sampled Joseph Marsh's special blend of doctrine, stirred up a fuss with Benjamin Wilson in Illinois and ultimately expressed his unique beliefs through the formation of the Christadelphians. Through this journey Thomas was baptized at least two times, indicating by his actions that his former understandings were in error.

Later on, it will be seen that Benjamin Wilson arrived in America and began to search for a church affiliation. He evidently associated with the Campbellites in Halifax but held off from starting a new Campbellite church in the United States. He exchanged correspondence with Dr. Thomas for a few years. Eventually, Wilson stood with the Brethren of the One Faith against Dr. Thomas.

Another reason Age to Come history is a challenge to write is because the Age to Come movement developed as independent congregations and small Bible Study groups without the guidance of a central organization. The Age

to Come Restitutionists organized in 1853 but that did not prove to be a long-lasting venture. Further, the publishing focal point of Rochester, New York, evaporated with Marsh's death and migrated westward to the Illinois frontier, the center of the Wilson publications.

The force which united these independent groups, aside from the leading of the Holy Spirit in such matters, was the ongoing high-quality publications of Joseph Marsh, Benjamin Wilson and other Age to Come authors, such as H. V. Reed, Thomas Newman, and Thomas Wilson.

By the time Marsh finished his book, *Age To Come*, in 1851, his ideas had clearly jelled and he was able to delineate between what he learned from Elias Smith and what he rejected from William Miller, and to weigh that newfound set of doctrines against the language of Dr. Thomas. He also thoughtfully considered the wisdom of others espousing Age to Come, such as J. B. Cook, R. V. Lyon, Mark Allen, Thomas Newman, and George Storrs.

Marsh didn't particularly care what people thought of him, but he wanted them to understand his ideas.

Because of his "journey" some people within the Age to Come movement also seemed to dislike and disrespect Joseph Marsh. Perhaps his critics did not realize at that time that they were also taking an intellectual and faith journey. Dr. Thomas repudiated him publicly because Marsh refused to be re-baptized after coming out of the Millerite movement. J. B. Cook eventually turned against him, and Mark Allen often referred to him in the literature in uncomplimentary terms. The "Brethren of the One Faith," as they called themselves on the Illinois frontier, also were unflattering towards Marsh.

A short passage in the *Gospel Banner and Millennial Advocate* reveals the distaste that some people in the "One Faith" felt toward Marsh and others whose doctrines developed over time, but who chose to honor their immersions and not be re-baptized.

The number of those in Rochester who love the truth is small. Those comprising the little ecclesia have mostly come to the truth through much tribulation of Millerism, Marshism, Cookism and Storrist and I judge from the bad road they have traveled they have had sufficient experience to enable them to endure hardness as good soldiers and to contend earnestly for the faith.⁴

⁴ Mark Allen, "Mark Allen's Western Tour." *Gospel Banner and Millennial Advocate*, 7:15 (August, 1861), 184.

Dr. John Thomas was one leader who popularized the notion that Joseph Marsh was a religious heretic by publishing harsh comments, his own and others. Here follows a portion of a letter published by him in the *Herald of the Kingdom and Age to Come* “. . . time will show that Friend Marsh and his parasites have done themselves no good.”⁵ The writer, John Williams, used the word “friend” because he would not call Marsh “brother in Christ.” Among those who sided with Dr. Thomas, Marsh was “unchristianized” by the good doctor over Marsh’s refusal to be re-baptized, and it was thought by the Rochester brethren (and apparently the brethren of the One Faith also) that he deserved to be so.

Comparison of Thought on Prophecy

Chart 1, included with this text, lists some of the ideas which separated the Age to Come movement from the Adventist movement. The Adventists did not want to apply the term “Adventist” to anyone who believed a divergent doctrine from Miller and Himes, especially the distasteful doctrine of the restoration of the Jews. Himes, himself, set out the differences between the Adventist and the Age to Come doctrinal positions. By and large, the lines Himes drew between the two groups satisfied the Age to Come people. They wanted nothing to do with the teachings of the Adventists, either.

Himes chose the term “Millennarians” which to his way of thinking included the Age to Come preachers and publishers.

The Age to Come people, however, felt their position was more divergent from Himes’ definition of Millennarians than even he knew. According to Himes, the Millennarians were futurists. They accepted the “Judaising” doctrine that gave the Jews the enormous privilege of ruling the nations during the millennial kingdom, which is the Age to Come. The Age to Come column of Chart 1 is drawn from Marsh’s *Age to Come* book and other early Age to Come sources to illustrate differences between Himes’ understanding and Marsh’s. Marsh listed many more differences than could be listed here.⁶

⁵ John Williams letter, “A Canadian Conference, and the Doings Therat.” *Herald of the Kingdom and Age to Come*, Westchester, N.Y., 8:11 (Nov. 1858), 257.

⁶ Froom has a helpful essay in *The Prophetic Faith of Our Fathers*, Volume IV, Appendix C, that sets out the differences between the old premillennial “Literalists” and the new Literalists.

Chart 1: Comparison of Millennarians, Millerite Adventists and Age-to-Come Restitutionists

After the Bitter Disappointments and Before Denominational Organization, 1845-1851

MILLENNARIANS	ADVENTISTS (Ex-Millerite)	AGE-TO-COME (Restitutionists)
Return of Christ:	Return of Christ:	Return of Christ:
A Pre-millennial return of Christ to Earth	A Pre-millennial	A Pre-millennial
B Jesus Reigns on earth for 1000 years	B Christ's return signals end of present evil age	B King Jesus reigns on earth for 1000 years
C Creation of new heavens and new earth at the end of 1000 years	C New heavens and new earth at time of Christ's return	C New heavens and new earth at end of the 1000 years
D New Jerusalem descends after 1000 years	D New Jerusalem descends at Christ's return	D New Jerusalem descends, God's judgment & eternal age begins after 1000 years
Jewish question:	Jewish question:	Jewish question:
A Jews return to Palestine before, at, or after Christ's return to possess land during 1000 years (Zionists)	A Jews return to Palestine ONLY in their resurrected state (not Zionists)	A Palestine restored to Eden state at Christ's return
	B Israel and Gentiles rule creatures, no mortal nations being present	B Jews have returned to homeland before Christ's return (also Zionists)
Future Punishment:	Future Punishment:	C Great Tribulation
A Part of heathen world will enter the 1000 years and have choice to accept Jesus.	A Wicked destroyed at Christ's return	D At Christ's return, Jews believe, are missionaries to mortal nations during 1000 yrs
B Concept of future probation.	B Sheep and Goat Judgment of nations No probation for Jews or Gentiles. No mortal subjects.	E Jews rule in Kingdom with Gentile Saints over mortal subjects
Method of Interpretation: Futurist	Interpretation: Historicist	Future Punishment:
		A Dead wicked raised at end of 1000 years for second death
		B Satan loosed from pit, wages war and is subdued, thrown into Lake of Fire
		C Future Probation
		Interpretation: Futurist/Literalist

Source: First two columns: Joshua Himes, *The Advent Shield and Review*, Vol. 1, 1844-1845; 47-48. Third column: Joseph Marsh, *Age to Come*, 1851, and writings of other early ATC leaders. Compiled by Jan Stilson.

III. DR. JOHN THOMAS AND ALEXANDER CAMPBELL

Dr. Thomas was educated as a medical doctor and earned his living at that practice in Great Britain. He was born in 1805, and immigrated with his family to the United States in 1832. To earn passage on the trip over, he served as ship's doctor, there being about 85 passengers. What should have been an easy passage became a real challenge as some epidemic swept through the passengers, and the good doctor was extremely busy the entire duration of the voyage, of several weeks.⁷

The voyage was a life-changing experience. He vowed that if he lived he would dedicate his life to being a Bible student and evangelist.

When Dr. Thomas left England he claimed no church affiliation. He had heard of Alexander Campbell and his father Thomas Campbell who were teaching Christian Unity and Restoration to a primitive New Testament gospel.

When Dr. Thomas arrived in America, he and his family traveled to Cincinnati. There he met Walter Scott, a noted preacher in Campbell's Restoration movement. After hearing Scott preach, Thomas became convinced that he needed water baptism, and was immersed. This was in 1832 and it is noteworthy to remember, because before too many years were to pass he would repudiate that baptism and be re-baptized.

Eventually through his association with Scott, Alexander Campbell became acquainted with Thomas. Campbell began to entrust him with preaching privileges, assigning him the region of Virginia. Thomas moved his family to Virginia and began a ministry to the area's Restoration churches.

During these early years, however, Dr. Thomas was also studying and thinking on the Kingdom of God, especially the millennial Age to Come, the return of the Jews to their homeland, and the cleansing of the earth for the millennial state. He also had some other ideas such as conditional immortality, partial resurrection, mortal emergence of believers from the resurrection grave, and annihilation of the wicked in Adam's death, never to be raised again.

Taken together, these ideas were too important to him and could not be repressed. Thomas felt duty-bound to interject some of these ideas into the Restoration circuit he served. Thomas began introducing these ideas into his preaching and the result was considerable unrest as might be expected.

⁷ Mary Kearns. "Dr. Bullard and the Thomasite Controversy," chapter three of an unpublished thesis. Emmanuel School of Religion: Johnson City, Tennessee, 1996.

Campbell made a trip into Virginia in November 1838, to meet with the doctor. They debated their differences, neither of them too happy with the other. After the debate Thomas agreed, in 1838, that he would not discuss his strange ideas any more within the Campbellite churches. For all practical purposes his “abjuration” meant that Thomas could no longer associate with the Campbellites.

Thomas and Campbell had no additional professional association, although friendly letters from Campbell may be seen in Thomas’s *Herald of the Kingdom and Age to Come*, years later. At that time, however, the relationship did not end on a happy note.⁸

Following the collapse of his association with the Disciples of Christ, as the Campbellites were being called in the United States, Thomas packed up his family and moved to Naperville, Illinois, where his wife’s family lived. He made his home with them briefly until he could make other arrangements. Eventually they settled in St. Charles.⁹

Over the next few years he made a home and career in Illinois.

On the issue of rebaptism, Thomas believed if one appreciably changed his mind on doctrines key to salvation, he must be rebaptized to signify repentance of the old understanding. To this end, he repudiated his baptism by Walter Scott, and was rebaptized in 1847. No one knows who the baptizer was.

In 1848, Thomas made his way across the Atlantic on a return visit to England. He moved freely among the many Churches of Christ, as the British Campbellites were known, who received him gladly because he had a letter of introduction from a Christian pastor in New York. Having gained their friendship and support, he began to teach his special biblical understandings which caused no end of consternation among the believers. Some churches were splitting, some believers following Thomas. He was confronted by the British Campbellite leaders with the question, “had he signed a document of abjuration before Alexander Campbell?” Thomas denied it.¹⁰

⁸ Alexander Campbell and John Thomas, M.D., “Reconciliation Between A. Campbell and Dr. Thomas,” *Millennial Harbinger and Apostolic Advocate*, Vol. 10 (February, 1839); as reprinted in *Christian Messenger and Reformer*, Vol. 3:3 (May, 1839), 93-97.

Also see Alexander Campbell, *Memoirs of Alexander Campbell Vol II*, Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1870, 449.

⁹ John Thomas, “Extract of Letter From Illinois. 1840.” *Christian Messenger and Reformer*, England, James Wallis editor, 4:2 (April, 1840), 61-64. This can be seen at: <http://fp.wall1836.f9.co.uk/archive/magazine/cmrvol4/cmrvol4004.htm>.

¹⁰ David King, “History and Mystery of Christadelphianism,” *Ecclesiastical Observer*: Birmingham, England, 1881. First published in 1869 as “A Glance at the History

Thomas left England and settled in Hoboken, New Jersey, and started an ecclesia (church) in Brooklyn.

IV. DR. THOMAS AND JOSEPH MARSH

Dr. Thomas' association with Joseph Marsh ended on the same note as his dealings with Alexander Campbell had ended, but it began on a friendly note.

Marsh was kicking up a little notice through his publications in Rochester, New York. Just barely a few years beyond the demise of the Millerite movement, contact was made between Thomas and Marsh.¹¹ In fact, as Marsh was thinking through his ideas on the Age to Come preparatory to writing his book, he wrote to Thomas, asking for exchange of periodicals which each of them was editing.

Through this exchange the men became friends, or so Marsh thought. Marsh invited Thomas to Rochester. He stayed in Marsh's home, and preached nightly at the church in Chapel Hall on the corner of Stillson and Main streets.

Since Marsh's ideas on the Age to Come were profoundly different than they had been when he published for the Christian Connection and for William Miller, Thomas expected him to be rebaptized. However, Marsh felt his salvation was sure, there was no need to recant, because the Christian life requires growth leading to maturity and perfection. One cannot be rebaptized with every new insight one has as he studies.

and Mystery of Thomasism," then revised and reprinted in 1881. It is interesting to note that when Dr. Thomas made another trip to England in 1868 David King wrote this tract to counteract any damage Thomas might do among the Campbellites, and Benjamin Wilson advertised it in the *Gospel Banner and Millennial Advocate*, 15:17 (September 1, 1869), 331.

It should also be mentioned that Chamberlin notes there was some confusion on both sides of the Atlantic over the nature of Dr. Thomas' abjuration. Some thought it meant his agreement to discontinue preaching his distinctives among the Campbellites. Some thought it meant his recanting of his first baptism by Walter Scott. Chamberlin said "We freely admit that Dr. Thomas' position was one which lent itself easily to misconstruction by those who were not his friends, but a strict examination of the facts of the case shows no trespass against truth. . . . abjuration of error was interpreted as cutting off all communion with the persons who might be in error." "Sketches of John Thomas, M.D." *The Aeon*, Joseph H. Chamberlin, editor; Birkenhead, Scotland, (February 12, 1886), 43.

¹¹ Mark M. Mattison, "Joseph Marsh's Doctrinal Development and Conflict with Christadelphianism." First published in two parts in *Church of God General Conference History Newsletter*; part one, 5:4 (April-May, 1993); part two, 5:5 (June-July, 1993); also published in *A Journal from the Radical Reformation*, 2:2 (Winter, 1993).

Over several months Thomas urged rebaptism, and finally lost patience with Marsh. People from Marsh's congregation began to take sides. Only a few sided with Marsh, the rest going with Thomas.¹²

Eventually, Marsh left the Rochester Church of God. Broken, Marsh returned for a year or so to worship in a local congregation of the Christian Connection. There were no other Age to Come congregations nearby, no familiar place to which Marsh could retreat except to the Christian Connection. The Christians, (pronounced "Christ-yans")¹³ welcomed him.

There is evidence that Marsh's writings had wide influence, and that congregations were springing up all over the frontier of Illinois, but these infant churches were too far away to be a haven for a broken man.¹⁴

V. MARSH'S LEGACY

It did not take long for Marsh to recover from his troubles. Within a few months, Marsh began an evangelistic tour of the west, as far south as central Indiana and as far north and west as Wisconsin. He attended a church conference in Indiana at which he was appointed evangelist. Before he could act, he became seriously ill with typhoid fever and headed immediately for Michigan to visit his daughter. There he died one month later, the year being 1863.¹⁵

Prior to his second departure from the Christian Connection, Marsh had sold his press and subscription list to Thomas Newman who continued to publish the *Prophetic Expositor* that Marsh had begun.

¹² John Thomas, "A Gospel Crisis in Rochester," *Herald of the Kingdom and Age to Come*, 8:5 (May, 1858), 109, 110.

¹³ Interview by Jan Stilson with Dr. Moses Crouse, historian and archivist of Aurora College, an Advent Christian college, before his death in 1982.

¹⁴ Paul Hatch, "Ripley Church History." Unpublished article in the notes of Mr. Hatch, circa 1960, loaned to author by Ivan Magaw, Oregon, Illinois.

Several exchanges of letters between a congregation in Mt. Sterling, Illinois and Marsh pleaded with him to send someone to preach for them. As early as 1848 or 1849 a letter from Mt. Sterling lay on the editor's desk in Rochester, New York. It was from two people who had signed their names Penkake and Sweet. The contents of the letter requested some minister of the Second Advent to visit a group out at Mt. Sterling. Nothing happened. About a year later, a second letter from Penkake and Sweet arrived at Marsh's desk making the same request. Paul Hatch details the arrival of the Chapmans to Springfield, Illinois, Mr. Chapman being an Adventist and Mrs. Chapman being an Age to Come preacher. She preached at Ripley near Mt. Sterling and he remained in Springfield, this being about 1850. It is not known if they maintained a happy marriage.

¹⁵ Mark Mattison, "Joseph Marsh . . .", *Church of God General Conference History Newsletter*, 5:5 (June-July, 1993).

Mattison believes Marsh's legacy continued into the midwest after his death through the object of his press. The press was sold eventually to Thomas Wilson,¹⁶ who used it to publish the *Restitution* after his own press was lost in the great Chicago fire of 1871. Mattison boldly states "in that sense Marsh was the founder of what became the *Restitution*, though Church of God extremists (Thomasites like Huggins and some of the Wilsons) never publicly acknowledged it."¹⁷

Not only did his press "live on" after his death, but Marsh's ideas lived on. Even though he apparently never met Benjamin Wilson, somehow Marsh's association with younger men, such as R.V. Lyon and Thomas Newman, became the means of advancing his ideas in the west which eventually merged with Wilson's ideas into the accepted thought of the Church of God General Conference.

VI. THOMAS AND THE ILLINOIS FRONTIER

St. Charles and Geneva, Illinois were sister cities, only separated by a few blocks. Both cities were to give birth to publication history which few historians recognize today.

John Thomas had made a contract with the city fathers of St. Charles to publish the first newspaper in that village. For that venture, he furnished the press which he had moved with his belongings from Virginia.¹⁸

When Thomas had been able to make arrangements for a building in which to locate his press, and to live, he moved his family north to St. Charles. The small family lived in the back of the newspaper office under rather simple and primitive conditions.¹⁹

One might think that Dr. Thomas and the new British printers at Geneva had met since they lived in sister villages during the same period of time, but Dr. Thomas indicated that he had his first meeting with Benjamin Wilson in

¹⁶ Thomas Wilson began his publishing career under the tutelage of his uncle, Benjamin Wilson of Geneva, Illinois. His journal, *Herald of the Coming Kingdom*, was healing and conciliatory. It stressed a positive and friendly discourse and discussion. Several of these fine volumes are housed at Atlanta Bible College's archives, Morrow, Georgia. There are also journals in this archive from all the major editors and publishers of the Age to Come movement: Thomas Newman, H.V. Reed, A.R. Underwood, Robert Huggins, as well as works by Storrs, Campbell and Charles Russell.

¹⁷ Mark Mattison, "Joseph Marsh . . .", *Church of God General Conference History Newsletter*, 5:5 (June-July, 1993).

¹⁸ *St. Charles Patriot*, John Thomas, M.D. editor and publisher. 1842-1843. Taken from microform collection of St. Charles Public Library; and, Ruth Pearson, *Reflections of St. Charles*, Brethren Press: Elgin, Illinois, 1976, 69.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

1856.²⁰ The Wilsons of Halifax set up a job print shop in Geneva and later began publishing *The Western Mercury* for the village. The Wilsons were avid and skilled Bible students, especially Benjamin, who was trained in the biblical Greek language.²¹

At the same time as these scholars were settling into a new land, many thousands of families migrated to Illinois to farm the rich black soil. The farmers in these families had fought against the Indians in the Black Hawk War of 1832. Remembering how fertile the glaciated soil was, many veterans returned to seek a livelihood.

Since he had his own press, Thomas also published the *Investigator*, a religious paper. Both the *Patriot* and the *Investigator* were short-lived ventures, the former lasting only from February 5, 1842 until May, 1843 and the latter less than that. The publishing business came to an abrupt halt when the press burned in a fire.



Figure 2: “John Thomas, M.D., Editor” may be seen in the lower left hand corner of the masthead of the *St. Charles Patriot*, in this, its premiere issue, February 5, 1842. The proposal for *The Investigator and Independent Advocate of Truth* is also visible in the body of text.

²⁰ John Thomas, M.D., “Visit to Canada and the West.”, *Herald of the Kingdom and Age to Come*, 7:2 (February, 1857), 32.

²¹ The Geneva histories and Wilson family histories say Benjamin immigrated in 1842, his family following in 1844. The British resources, however, indicate Benjamin was in England in 1843. He evidently returned to England for a time, perhaps to assist his family in the upcoming relocation. In a “Letter from Halifax” dated April 20, 1843, he is cited as preaching at Harrogate in April 1843. It must have been Benjamin Wilson, because none of his brothers or nephews had given names beginning with “B.,” and in the letter, the writer referred to him as “brother,” meaning brother in Christ. See *Christian Messenger and Reformer*, James Wallis, editor, 7:3 (May, 1843), 101.

Dr. Thomas was then invited to begin teaching Anatomy at the newly established Franklin Medical Institute in St. Charles, the first medical school in Illinois. He accepted and was one of three professors.²² Among the history books of St. Charles is a mention of the Jerusalem Church. This very likely was a Thomasite study group. It used the building of the Universalist Church for a meeting hall.²³

Dr. Thomas may have gotten restless in Illinois, for he began to travel and never took up residence there again. At any rate, he left his medical work on the frontier and returned east. Eventually he went to New York and Kentucky to travel among the ex-Millerites, and even farther, to England in 1848.

David King suggests the reason for his trip to England:

From the date of this abjuration he has stood in the attitude of leader and founder of a sect entitled to bear his name — which sect, after compassing sea and land for some sixteen years to make proselytes, he then put down as not “exceeding, perhaps, a thousand in America and Great Britain.” The next year found him in this country, for the purpose of propagating his opinions. But why come here? Because there were then, perhaps, a hundred churches of the faith he had abjured, from which he hoped to make converts.²⁴

While Thomas was abroad, the frontier began filling up with pioneers.

Age to Come on the Illinois Frontier

Cut off from their churches, the frontiersmen relied upon the U.S. mail to bring them news from the east, and to bring them religious newspapers. They were well aware of the disintegration of the Adventist movement, and were hungering for more information about it, and where it might be headed in the future. They were truth seekers. A newly formed church in Kansas wrote, “We appreciate the press . . . and highly prize *The Herald of Life, The Gospel Banner, The Herald of the Coming Kingdom, The World’s Crisis* and the *Marturion*.”²⁵

²² It has been suggested that Dr. Thomas picked up a second medical degree, but it is more likely that, being a foreign doctor, in order to teach and to practice he had to be recognized with an American medical certificate. To do this undoubtedly would have required some course work to eliminate deficiencies and to be tested in a proficiency exam to prove his British medical education was equivalent to an American degree.

²³ Kane County History, St. Charles Heritage Museum collection, 518.

²⁴ David King, “History and Mystery of Christadelphianism.”

²⁵ W.J. Orem, “Report of Wolf River Conference,” *Gospel Banner and Millennial Advocate*, 15:17 (September 1, 1869), 350.

There were congregations forming all over the Middle West and Great Plains who had come to believe the prophecies of the Age to Come.

The writings of Elias Smith of the early Christian Connection may account for some of this phenomenon. Smith taught the doctrine and published it in his journal, *Herald of Gospel Liberty*, nearly a generation earlier. Eastern men who moved west evidently brought this teaching with them. Certainly the writings of Marsh, Wilson and Thomas would strike a chord with these transplanted easterners.

Graham says, "Age-to-Come Adventism, one of several unpopular beliefs at the time, was Smith's most cherished belief. He wrote and preached profusely to defend it. *This is how the message of the gospel of the kingdom found its way in America.*"²⁶ Elias Smith was on the Executive Committee of the *Christian Palladium* when Marsh edited it in 1842. The two men knew each other.²⁷

It is important to note that the Age to Come doctrine existed and flourished in America before the Millerite movement gained steam. William Miller and Joshua Himes may be credited with subverting it by clouding the doctrine with the faulty label of "Judaizers." They could have popularized it as they did George Storrs' Six Sermons on Conditional Immortality. They did not. Instead, they persecuted Marsh.

The Millerites never preached it because they did not believe in the return of the Jews to their homeland prior to the return of Christ to earth. Many of the congregations which were growing on the frontier, however, were familiar with the faith and were early Zionists.

Believers who advocated the doctrine of the restoration of Israel prior to the Second Advent became known as the "One Faith." This doctrine was based on the covenant made with Abraham, the faith of Abraham, and the promises made to him which would find their fulfillment in the second advent of Jesus to earth to establish his kingdom.

The frontier congregations who believed One Faith included East Plum River and West Plum River in Carroll and Jo Daviess counties of northern Illinois, Antioch and Paynes Point near Oregon in Ogle county, Dixon in Lee county and Harvard in McHenry county. By this time a congregation had formed near Camp Point, which eventually became the Ripley congregation in Brown county of western Illinois. There were several congregations in

²⁶ David Graham, "The Age-to-Come Influence of Elias Smith." *Church of God General Conference History Newsletter*, 1:2 (Summer, 1984), cover. Emphasis added.

²⁷ *Christian Palladium* masthead, Joseph Marsh, editor, 11:16 (December 15, 1842).

Wisconsin, Iowa, Kansas, Michigan, Indiana, Ohio, Nebraska and Missouri as well.

These frontier Bible scholars began looking toward Geneva, Illinois and the growing power of the voice of Benjamin Wilson, eminent publisher, Bible scholar, translator and evangelist, as the leading authority on many of their questions relating to Dr. Thomas and Bible study in general.

Benjamin Wilson began to shepherd these people. He traveled to meet with many of them or their leaders, teaching and preaching, staying in their homes and studying the Bible with them.²⁸ Although there was no central church organization as yet, he was becoming equivalent to a frontier bishop looking after the flock.

VII. DR. THOMAS AND BENJAMIN WILSON

John Thomas tried to harvest the Geneva flock in Illinois, and where he made unique contacts he tried to protect them from Geneva's influence.

To a certain extent the people were receptive to both Thomas and Wilson. At the beginning of their association, Wilson and Thomas believed similarly. Eventually, however, they found ample reason to disagree with each other. Most believers were put off by the tactics of Dr. Thomas when the friendship began to turn sour. The correspondence in the *Gospel Banner and Millennial Advocate*, which Benjamin Wilson published, amply reveals this to the reader.

One family which Thomas cultivated, which Wilson also visited was the Samuel W. Coffman family in Maryland Township, Ogle County, north of Adeline, Illinois.

It is this family around which revolves the question of how and when Dr. Thomas formed his denomination, changing it from the sectarian nomenclature of "Thomasites" to the controversial name of Christadelphians. Therefore, we will explore this one frontier family a bit more than we might otherwise do.

The Coffman Family

The extended Coffman family moved to Illinois from Maryland in 1840 and purchased 1,000 acres of land. Land was selling for about \$1.25 an acre since the government had opened up the territory to settlers. All the members of the Coffman family including John, Jacob, Samuel and Addison

²⁸ B. Wilson, "Editorial Wanderings," *Gospel Banner and Millennial Advocate*, 6:11 (November, 1860), 128-131; also "A Macedonian Cry Answered," *Gospel Banner and Millennial Advocate*, 15:1 (January 1, 1869), 15, 16.

were Thomasites.²⁹ Very likely they knew John Thomas from when they all lived in the east. The Coffmans may have migrated to Illinois because Thomas had moved there in the same year, yet the present Coffman family is unaware of their forefathers' association with Dr. Thomas.

It was at the home of Jacob Coffman that Dr. Thomas, Jacob and Samuel Coffman met to form the new denomination, Christadelphians, during the final years of the Civil War in America. This was done to protect the members from military duty.

No records have been located in Ogle county which bear witness to the outcome of this meeting, although Dr. Thomas' own words indicate such a document existed either at the courthouse in Oregon, Illinois or with some member of the Coffman family.

Referring to that document, Dr. Thomas said:

I wrote for them the following certificate: This is to certify that S.W. Coffman (the names of the ten male members in full here) and others constitute a religious association denominated herein for the sake of distinguishing them from other Names and Denominations Brethren In Christ or in one word, Christadelphians; and that the said brethren are in fellowship with similar associations in England, Scotland, the British Provinces, New York and other cities of the North and South — New York being for the time present the radiating center of their testimony to the people of the current age and generation of the world.³⁰

The writer of the "Sketches," Joseph Chamberlin, related that Dr. Thomas said this document seemed to satisfy the Coffman family, and he went with them to a notary public and affirmed his signature to it. "The county seal was affixed to it, and the document handed to Bro. S. Coffman for safe keeping." Thomas further stated he sent a copy to the brethren at Henderson County, Kentucky "in the hope that as we had been so successful in leading off the Confederates we might not be less so in turning the position of the Federals also."

²⁹ Ogle County History, Ogle County Bicentennial History Committee, "Maryland Township." 1976; 235.

³⁰ "Sketches of John Thomas, M.D." *The Aeon*, Joseph H. Chamberlin, editor. Birkenhead, Scotland, 2:89 (June 18, 1886), 277. It should be noted that Edward N. Wright makes the point that the Christadelphian petition was the last enrollment act to be passed by Congress and it did not occur until the hostilities were nearly over, March 3, 1865. *Conscientious Objectors in the Civil War*, New York: A.S. Barnes, 1897; 89, 90. Wright quotes U.S. Statutes at Large (38 Cong. Sess II, chap 79) XIII, 487-491.

In an interview by the author with Ralph Coffman, great-great-grandson of Sam Coffman, Mr. Coffman confirmed that Sam Coffman did not serve in the Civil War. There are no family records available to determine if he hired a substitute, nor could this be immediately determined via a search of Civil War records.³¹

Was Dr. Thomas a Pacifist?

Dr. Thomas held a point of view on pacifism described by Peter Brock as “conditional pacifism” which contained a “strong strain of violence” and which was an “extreme right-wing element of pacifism.”³²

While it may seem that these descriptors are contrary to the notion of pacifism, please let the reader keep in mind that Dr. Thomas had a world view which emphasized the Age to Come.

Dr. Thomas believed that before the next age could be ushered in there would be war, led by the King of Kings himself. So while Thomas adhered to war in this age as a necessity, and believed it would also be a precursor to the establishment of the Kingdom of God, he decried going to war by the Christian believer in this age. According to Robert Roberts in *Dr. Thomas: His Life and Work*, this idea was presented to the London Peace Conference in 1849, and was summarily rejected by the delegates.

The “conditional pacifists” who were adherents of Thomasism, accepted the necessity of war between nations to keep tyranny at bay, while individual Christian believers maintained a non-violent stance in the face of war. But in that day and age, believers were ill-prepared to deal with the moral dilemma the Civil War presented.

The Civil War involved two governments. Dr. Thomas indicated in the “Sketches” of the *Aeon*, that he intervened on behalf of the southern brethren. This he did by instructing Bro. Ellis that all members of the congregation declare themselves as “licensed preachers,” therefore being exempt from the draft in the Confederacy. The court granted these exemptions although the officer in charge considered it highly unusual that ten men should be ministers in the same congregation.

This effective method of allaying the draft was evidently applied by each congregation that was threatened by the draft throughout the South. In the

³¹ Interview with Ralph Coffman, Forrester, Illinois, March 2001. Mr. Coffman resides on the original Coffman property in Maryland township and was very interested in hearing details of his early family.

³² Peter Brock, *Pacifism in the United States from the Colonial Era to the First World War*, Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1968; 861-866.

face of danger, Dr. Thomas seemed tireless in assisting his followers in this manner.

Thomas gained southern believers exemptions as clergymen, but this was not possible in the Union states. Union laws were not tolerant to any exemption, the Union's Militia Act of 1862, 1863 and 1864 did not provide exemption for clergy or conscientious objectors. The only way a man could avoid military service was to pay \$300 and hire a substitute.³³ Peace denominations had to register with the federal government to be recognized as pacifistic and to receive tax-free status for the Income Tax imposed during the Civil War. Those denominations commonly recognized for exemptions included Shakers, Quakers, and Mennonites.

To deal with the differences in law between the North and the South, Dr. Thomas agreed to form a new denomination and register it as described in the law.

This decision may have been a conflicted one for the doctor. In his youth he had stated he never would form a new denomination. He believed the idea to be "Contemptible!"

In the August, 1885, *Aeon* (using as its source the *Apostolic Advocate* of October, 1836): he stated, "I belong to no action and trust I never will be . . . as to desiring to be the head of a religious party, I scorn the position as unworthy of a Christian man. When I reflect upon who have been the heads of religious parties in the world, I feel I should be degraded were I to be added to them."³⁴

These are harsh words from a young man. It would appear on the surface, that even though he was a man of strong convictions, as he grew older, he waffled on this point for the sake of retaining his followers who were opposed to the Civil War.

The Influence of Pacifism upon an Advocate of Slavery

It is interesting to note that Dr. Thomas evidently supported the cause of slavery, believing that it had biblical foundations. While he never owned slaves, he used their services. He defended slavery and hired slaves through

³³ Civil War Draft Records. National Archives, Washington, D.C., RG110 Enrollment Act March 3, 1863. See also Exemption Papers of U.S. among the Civil War Draft Records. Refer to: <http://www.public.usit.net/mruddy/substitu.htm>.

³⁴ Joseph H. Chamberlin, "Sketches . . .", *Aeon*, 1:45 (August 7, 1885), 355.

their owner, when he farmed in Virginia.³⁵ Because of this practice, he may have found himself in a moral quandary. Both slavery and pacifism had biblical foundations, and he needed to reconcile the two ideas while preserving his integrity and lending his supporters a way of escape from the war. It would appear that his belief in the biblical foundation of slavery lost ground in his mind over the need of his followers to be free from the draft.

The “Sketches” in the *Aeon* describe Dr. Thomas as a militant person. He was not a peaceful and soft-spoken man. In strong language he described himself as a “man of war,” drawing an analogy to the Christian warrior wearing the armor of God. Bro. Tolbert Fanning, noted editor of the Campbellite paper *Christian Review*, wrote that Thomas used “dangerous weapons and plucked out the eyes of his opponents.” Dr. Thomas answered, “but assuming you are correct, what objection have you to a Christian being a man of war? Can a man be a conqueror without being a man of war?”³⁶ Dr. Thomas was referring to the spiritual battle. He believed that his opponents shrank before him because his most dangerous weapon was truth. His image among many people was that of a factious, contentious pugilist. Although he was a man of Christ, he did not seem to be a man of peace. One can visualize this forceful outspoken man aggressively approaching the authorities on an issue of peace on behalf of believers who wished to avoid military conflict. How strange that must have seemed to the witnesses at the scene, yet because of his style and strategy, the doctor accomplished a major victory.

Before we leave the subject of Dr. Thomas and his efforts to protect his American followers from the draft, it should also be recognized that not every one of his international followers appreciated his decision to form a denomination, nor the name he chose for it. This, however, must be left for another research project.

The draft was also a subject of discussion among the followers of the One Faith, but no conclusive research has been done which proves Benjamin Wilson or any other leader worked as aggressively to register any denomination as a peace church.

³⁵ Lewis Hichlin, “Is Dr. Thomas a Safe Expositor of Scripture?” *Gospel Banner and Millennial Advocate*. Geneva, Illinois, Benjamin Wilson, publisher. 15:13 (July 1, 1869), 263.

Also see John Thomas. “Extract of Letter from Illinois. 1840.” (referred to at footnote 9). *Christian Messenger and Reformer*, 4:2 (April, 1840), 62.

³⁶ Joseph H. Chamberlin, “Sketches,” *Aeon*, 2:55 (October 23, 1885), 19.

It is remarkable that Mark Drabenstott has said Benjamin Wilson registered the "Church of God Abrahamic Faith" as a pacifist denomination during the Civil War.³⁷ To date that has not been documented. Individual state and regional One Faith conferences sought to protect their members from military service by going on record as being pacifist and noting it in their minutes and conference reports.³⁸

It is entirely possible that some of these men cited membership in the Christadelphian faith to avoid the draft, retiring from the hastily formed denomination when the War Between the States was over. This is a reasonable conclusion judging from the interactions of the congregations with both Wilson and Thomas as described in both men's journals.

VIII. INTERACTIONS OF KEY RELIGIOUS LEADERS

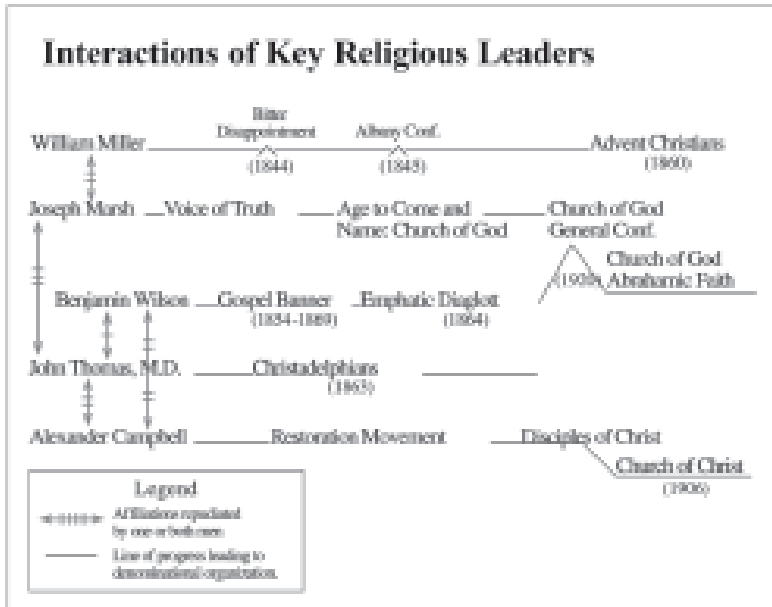
The religious leaders mentioned in this account mingled freely with each other and appeared frequently in each other's periodicals. One influenced another, while a second influenced a third who counteracted the comments of the first. Sorting it out has been interesting, especially when some rare writings are located. An archive of this material is still being gathered.³⁹

³⁷ Mark Drabenstott, "The Church of God of the Abrahamic Faith: A Brief History." *Tidings* (January, 1993), 23; and Jan Stilson response, "Church of God Abrahamic Faith and Other Thoughts," *Church of God General Conference History Newsletter*, Oregon, Illinois, 5:4 (April-May, 1993).

This author has not seen all the copies of *Gospel Banner and Millennial Advocate* in existence, but in the several which have been examined, no documentation of this claim can be found.

³⁸ C.W. Tompkins, "Sect. Northern Illinois & Southern Wisconsin. A Brief Report." *Gospel Banner and Millennial Advocate*, 10:19 (October 1, 1864), 228.

³⁹ The Geneva Historical Society made volumes four, five and six of the *Gospel Banner and Millennial Advocate* available to the author. These and other volumes loaned from the Atlanta archives have now been microfilmed. Contact the author about purchasing copies.



Source: J. Stilson Research

Figure 3: Marsh left the Millerite movement. Dr. John Thomas moved among several religious innovators during his career, but did not consider himself joined with any. Campbell thought Thomas was with him, but broke with Thomas and stopped his subscription to Wilson’s *Gospel Banner*. Thomas broke with Marsh, while Wilson and Thomas mutually agreed to disassociate from each other.

To help the reader organize the religious leaders and their concepts an attempt has been made to illustrate them in Figure 3.

It will be seen from Figure 3 that all these religious leaders in America in the mid-19th century operated somewhat independently of each other. They were mostly removed from each other geographically, and travel was difficult although not impossible. They all had their own pet hobbies regarding doctrines which made them ultimately incompatible with each other.

William Miller and Alexander Campbell had little or no dealings with each other. Benjamin Wilson and Alexander Campbell apparently knew each other through the congregation at Halifax which was a Campbellite group. In *Christian Messenger and Reformer* appears a letter from Halifax by James Wallis, editor, stating, “I saw brother B. Wilson last night, who has been there about a week . . .” Mr. Wallis had visited Halifax on April 2, 1843.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ 7:3, 101 (referred to in footnote 21).

However, it is not apparent that Wilson and Campbell worked together to establish any work in Illinois for the Disciples of Christ. It seems more likely that while Campbell knew of the Geneva Wilsons and received copies of Benjamin's various publications, he did not endorse them and eventually stopped reading them. He indicated this to Wilson, much to the latter's surprise.⁴¹

Joseph Marsh and Benjamin Wilson knew of each other but apparently never met. Wilson did not highly regard Marsh as evidenced from some

⁴¹ Correspondence, Alexander Campbell of Washington to Benjamin Wilson. *Gospel Banner and Millennial Advocate*, 6:1 (January 13, 1860), 7.

Michael Casey, professor of communications at Pepperdine University, who was kind enough to read a draft of this paper, doubted that Alexander Campbell was even aware of Benjamin Wilson. He thought that the letter cited could be from another Alexander Campbell. Additional research found that at the end of 1859 Alexander Campbell, founder of the Reformation Movement also known as the Campbellites, visited the Platte City Female Seminary in Platte City, Mo. and returned home to Bethany, Va. in December. He may have returned home by train through Washington County, Mo. and have jotted off a note to Wilson in route. We can't rule it out. Also, Campbell's home in Bethany, Va. is just a few miles from Washington, Pa. Campbell is listed in the 1810 census in Washington before he married. He was well acquainted with it and visited it numerous times. If he mailed a letter from there it must have been before he left for Missouri. While this may seem speculative, what we know for sure is that the letter in the January 13, 1860 issue would have been received in the latter part of 1859. At that time Alexander Campbell was on the move, not at Bethany, Va. (now West Virginia).

The Wilson family were members of a British Campbellite congregation in Halifax before emigrating to Illinois, and they visited other British Campbellite churches extensively. Paul Dover of Nottingham, himself a Church of Christ scholar, has corroborated the last comment by locating several citations in *Christian Messenger and Reformer*, Volume 7 (1843-1844), referring to the Wilsons and specifically to Benjamin Wilson. It is quite likely that Mr. Campbell knew of the Wilsons before they migrated.

William Wachtel, a Church of God scholar, historian and owner of a private collection of Wilson's *Gospel Banner and Millennial Advocate*, has stated, "I believe you are right about the Alexander Campbell mentioned in the *Gospel Banner*. . . . knowing the connection between these men, I have no reason to doubt that this is the Alexander Campbell." It is not unreasonable that Mr. Campbell would want to disassociate himself from any of Wilson's writings. Campbell would associate Wilson's doctrine with the "materialism" of Dr. Thomas and would not recommend Wilson's *Gospel Banner* to his readers. He commonly included lists in the *Millennial Harbinger* of religious journals which he did endorse. Not finding the *Gospel Banner* among those recommended does not mean Campbell did not receive it. Very likely he did. He was fully informed of the Methodist, Baptist, Christian Connection and Christadelphian journals. He could not have been uninformed about such an excellent work as the *Gospel Banner*, which by the time Campbell unsubscribed himself was already in its sixth volume. In the *Gospel Banner*, leading up to the date of that letter of disassociation, there was a series of articles and comments titled "Alexander Campbell Against Himself." Mr. Campbell could have been taking exception to what he interpreted as unkind comments.

Having said this, it is still worthwhile to continue research on this question.

negative comments he printed in the *Gospel Banner*, and also by his silence about certain issues which Marsh loved.

Wilson avoided extensive discussion on two topics: the Age to Come and the name of the church being Church of God, as both topics were pet doctrines of Marsh. He published articles others had written on these topics but his editorial comments on these topics were sparse. Strangely, the independent efforts of Marsh and Wilson succeeded in uniting the Age to Come and One Faith congregations into the Church of God General Conference in 1921 many years after their deaths.⁴²

All of these men, with the possible exception of William Miller, knew Dr. John Thomas. Dr. Thomas collected religious leaders and tried to turn them to his cause. When he had gained their trust and friendship, he pulled the rug from under them and gathered their flocks to himself. Evidently, having upset Campbell, having upset Marsh, having denigrated the Miller movement, Thomas turned his attention to Wilson, a key voice in the Middle West.

IX. WHO WAS BENJAMIN WILSON?

The Gospel Banner, published by Wilson, was a very popular journal with its readers and had agents and correspondents in the churches to promote it and sell subscriptions. Also, ex-men promoted it. By that is meant, the Ex-7th Days, J.M. Stephenson and O.R. L. Crozier; the Ex-Millerites such as R.V. Lyon; and Ex-Campbellites such as James Stone, Kentucky, and all the members of the Wilson church in Geneva.

Wilson had started his publishing career in Illinois by putting out a weekly newspaper called the *Western Mercury* in Geneva. Later he published other titles jointly with another member of the Geneva congregation, Joseph Cockcroft, who was a Christadelphian believer.⁴³

After a couple of years, Benjamin Wilson became uneasy in his position as publisher of a city newspaper, and yearned to publish a religious periodical. He began the *Gospel Banner and Millennial Advocate* in 1854 which continued until it combined with the *Herald of the Coming Kingdom and Christian Instructor* beginning with the 1870 volume. The two journals both

⁴² It should be noted that five churches from the general movement (in Indiana, Kentucky and Ohio) did not become charter churches with the General Conference in 1921 but continued as autonomous congregations under the name "Church of God of the Abrahamic Faith." They consider that they can trace their heritage more directly to Wilson, ignoring Marsh.

⁴³ *Western Mercury*, Geneva, Illinois, 1849–50 (copies are available on microfilm through the Illinois State Historical Library); also, copy of interview with Frank Underwood, Geneva Historical Society, Geneva, Illinois.

published in 1869, but the delegates from Illinois, Michigan and Wisconsin had voted to combine them, the preferred title being *Herald of the Coming Kingdom and Christian Instructor*. If this were hurtful to Wilson, he did not say.

The *Gospel Banner*, not to be confused with a journal of the same name published in Great Britain, was an excellent piece of literature. Nothing Wilson touched could be less than excellent. The work was highly esteemed by the readers and critics alike as far as quality of workmanship is concerned. Not everyone loved the doctrine it promoted.

The *Gospel Banner* and its publisher were dedicated to promoting the "One Faith" doctrine far and wide. When readers wrote to Wilson to send someone to teach them, he went himself.⁴⁴

After a few years, Wilson did what no man had done to date anywhere in the world. He produced an interlinear translation of the New Testament from the Greek text. Under each line was a rough translation in English representing as closely as possible the meaning of the Greek language used in the passage. It was revolutionary, and very helpful to Bible scholars. The Age to Come people loved it.

It was not popular with the orthodox churches because it literally translated passages which had formerly been translated by others to represent orthodox teachings such as the trinity, the pre-existence of Jesus, and Christians going to heaven. It had widespread appeal however. An early rare edition of the *Emphatic Diaglott* has been located in the library of a Church of Christ in Grand Rapids, Michigan.

The *Emphatic Diaglott* was published first in a series of pamphlets as Wilson completed each book, and was offered to subscribers of the *Gospel Banner* for 20 cents, or \$4.00 for the bound book. None of those original pamphlets are known to exist.⁴⁵

Benjamin Wilson himself produced the first bound edition of the *Emphatic Diaglott* in Geneva, Illinois. It was probably finished and distributed to a select few in 1864. Fowler & Wells of New York published the first "formal" edition in 1865. This company advertised regularly in the *Western Mercury* and was well known to Wilson.

⁴⁴ B. Wilson, "Editorial Wanderings," as cited in footnote number 28.

⁴⁵ Ad for *Emphatic Diaglott*, *Gospel Banner*, 6:1 (January, 1860), 2.

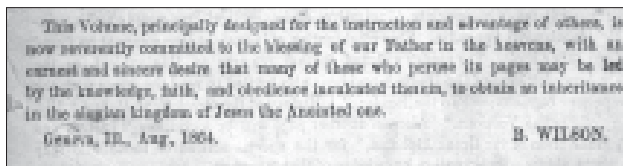
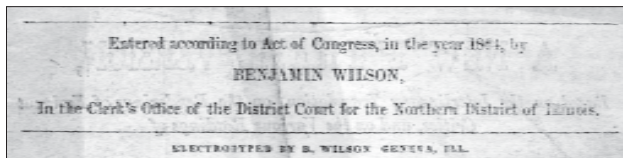
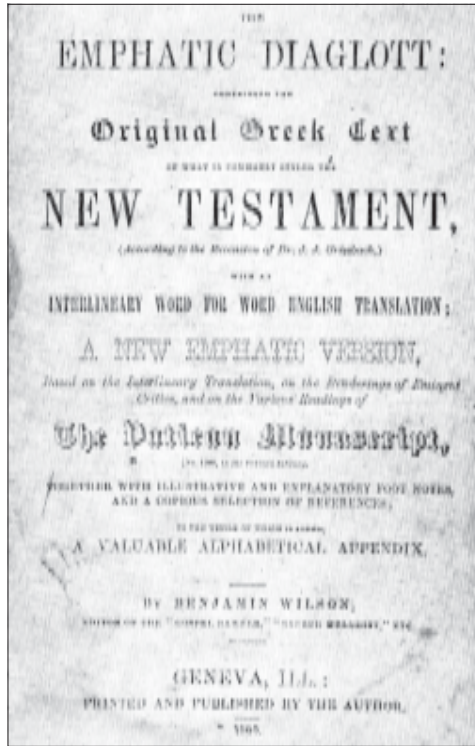


Figure 4: The *Emphatic Diaglott* was first printed and published by Benjamin Wilson in Geneva, Illinois. Shown are text from front and reverse of the *Diaglott* title page; end of preface in original bound *Diaglott* showing 1864 date with B. Wilson's name.

A copy of the first edition was donated to the Church of God General Conference by a niece of Benjamin Wilson, his sister Ruth's daughter, Dr. Leila Whitehead.⁴⁶ See Figure 4.

⁴⁶The author knew Dr. Whitehead and visited with her many times in her home with Mrs. F.L. Austin. Both ladies were formerly of Chicago and retired to Oregon, Illinois.

Benjamin Wilson's Various Opinions

Benjamin Wilson was a man of strong opinion. He parted with John Thomas over the issue of mortal emergence of believers on resurrection day. They also had differing opinions on the emblem for the cup in communion. Thomas believed it should be wine; Wilson, grape juice. He was so adamant about this that the reader finds a recipe in the *Gospel Banner* for those winter months when fresh grape juice was not available. During that time, raisins soaked in water provided a suitable fruit juice for communion.⁴⁷

Keeping in mind Wilson's penchant for sticking to his ways, let's get back now to something touched on a few pages ago: the name of the developing denomination.

Wilson did not make an issue of it, but apparently he had some reservations about calling the gathering of congregations "Church of God." He never used the term so far as this writer can tell to describe the One Faith. Perhaps it was because Joseph Marsh so freely advocated that name as the ONLY scriptural name.

Wilson never hesitated to publish any variation of the name Church of God, if correspondents used it when they wrote to the *Gospel Banner*. For example, the Michigan churches almost always used the name Church of God, and L.H. Chase was fond of "Abrahamic Faith."⁴⁸ But when Wilson referred to the gatherings he preferred to use "Brethren of the One Faith," or shorter yet, "One Faith." Most of the conference calls and conference reports begin with the words, "the congregation at Geneva," or "the brethren of One Faith at East Plum."⁴⁹

It should be noted briefly that Benjamin Wilson also disagreed with Dr. Thomas on the name "Christadelphian." It was not scriptural. It did not convey that Thomas' followers were followers of Christ, but rather, followers of the brethren of Christ, Wilson said.

Yet, for the denomination which was forming around Wilson's own writings, he could not accept the scriptural name, "Church of God."

⁴⁷ Benjamin Wilson, "The Wine Question: Is Alcohol Found in the Grape?" *Gospel Banner and Millennial Advocate*, 10:12 (June 15, 1864), 138; and B. Wilson "Editorial Wanderings," *Gospel Banner and Millennial Advocate*, 6:11 (November, 1860), 130 (referred to in footnote 28).

⁴⁸ L.H. Chase, Correspondence, *Gospel Banner and Millennial Advocate*, 10:13 (July 1, 1864), 150.

⁴⁹ Henry Pierce, "Report of Fifteenth Annual Conference of the Brethren of One Faith," Aurora, Illinois, *Gospel Banner and Millennial Advocate*, 10:14 (July 15, 1864), Geneva, Illinois, 162.

Was Benjamin Wilson a Campbellite?

When the Wilsons settled in Geneva, they worshipped for a few years in the second story of a private residence. Then in 1857 they engaged a contractor from the congregation to build a church building. The congregation named it Disciples Meeting House. Even though they preached a doctrine divergent from Campbellism, they never changed the name of the church. To this day, the historians of Geneva, Illinois, refer to Benjamin Wilson and all his family as Disciples of Christ, a designation for Campbellite followers, and the church building, still standing, remains “The Disciples Meeting House.”⁵⁰

This is erroneous, but it’s hard to revise faulty history. Erroneous history often takes on the strength of a legend, and people don’t want to give it up.

Apparently the Wilsons did not promote themselves or their newfound One Faith very highly in their own community. That is not to say they were not evangelistically minded. Many of the men of the congregation were extremely active in reaching out to other communities such as Northfield, Aurora, Chicago, Harvard, Austin and other suburbs.

This is also not to say the Geneva congregation did not grow. There were reports of baptisms in the *Gospel Banner* on a regular basis. It would seem that even though the professionals in the church had the newspaper of the community tied up, if you will, they did not use it to promote themselves. Very likely they considered it a conflict of interest, a matter of ethics.

There is the larger meaning of the terminology to consider. All believers are disciples of Christ, and that seems to be the focus the Geneva congregation pursued. The citizens and historians of Geneva went on believing “The Little Wilson” church was Campbellite, even though the congregation departed from Campbell. One wonders whether if they had changed the sign on the church to read “One Faith Meeting House,” certain errors might have been avoided among the townspeople.

Thomas Wilson attempted to clear up the matter. “. . . some have the idea that the Meeting House referred to belongs to the Campbellite Society which is erroneous. It was built some years ago by the congregation of believers and has ever since been occupied by them.”⁵¹ The implication seems to be that the Campbellites neither owned the building, nor possessed the congregation.

⁵⁰ History of Geneva, Illinois, Geneva Public Library, Geneva, Illinois, 1977, 271.

⁵¹ Thomas Wilson, “Report of the Eighth Semi-Annual Conference.” *Gospel Banner and Millennial Advocate*, 7:1 (January 1, 1861), 6.

Was Benjamin Wilson a Christadelphian?

People seemed confused about the Wilsons and the Brethren of One Faith. Dr. Thomas enlarged upon that fact to his advantage.

Referring to one statement by John Thomas, Thomas Wilson said, "While on the subject of free investigation we may remark that we have not forgotten the declaration of one who is now almost revered by members of the church, that if he had the power he would speedily suspend the publication of certain religious papers which he deemed detrimental to his views of the truth." And, "If he can suppose that he can link us with Adventists as part of the same body he is much mistaken. Adventists are opponents of the Gospel as preached by Christ and his Apostles. We have not ever had any fellowship with them."⁵²

Another quote fully amplifies this problem. Thomas Wilson quoted from *The Voice of the West*:

A short time since a body calling themselves the "Brethren of the One Faith," met in Conference in Chicago. As their principles are sometimes mistaken for Adventism, and as all our readers may not have a clear understanding of their position, we have thought it worth while to present a quite clear statement of it from an authoritative source. We may premise, that those "Brethren of One Faith" are better known as "Age to Come," or "Thomasites," or the "Church of God." And, also, that unless they agree in opinion in the future better than in the past, their new name is like to prove a misnomer.⁵³

Dr. Thomas was not the only one to try to portray the One Faith as synonymous with Adventism. The Wilsons considered this an insult, but Thomas was unconcerned. He even tried to undercut the influence of the *Gospel Banner* by casting it in a bad light so subscribers would cancel.

Dr. Thomas also tried to besmirch the reputation of Benjamin Wilson. He relayed comments which he said Wilson had made about a lady which were slanderous. The accusation and the response were discussed in the journals for several issues.

Mr. Wilson bore it with a gracious spirit. He did not allow his name to be darkened, however. He defended himself through the pages of the *Banner* by

⁵² Thomas Wilson, "The Challenge Again," *Herald of the Coming Kingdom and Christian Instructor*, 1:21 (November 1, 1868), 532, 533.

⁵³ "One Faith," *Herald of the Coming Kingdom and Christian Instructor*, 2:15 (August 1, 1869), 368.

issuing a special section, which was generally not bound with the *Banner*. Hence, we do not have a record of that defense. We do know from what little evidence exists in the *Banner* that the issue was a financial matter settled in the courts, and not a morals charge. It involved a Bro. Innes, and Miss Hayes, Wilson being brought into the fray only because he published an account of it.

It is not our purpose here to dig into the details of the uproar. It is enough to recognize that Wilson and the congregation had a problem on their hands, and he handled it in an admirable, professional, and Christian manner.⁵⁴

Wilson's readers rallied behind him. The correspondence is rich with letters endorsing Wilson and decrying the foul manner in which Dr. Thomas had dealt with him.

One can sense in the pages of the *Banner* that the ordeal took a toll on Wilson. He replied infrequently to questions from readers, and when he did his comments were short. However, a surge of editorial writings was forthcoming both in 1868 and 1869. During this period of time discussion was rampant among the brethren to merge the *Banner* with Thomas Wilson's *Herald of the Coming Kingdom and Christian Instructor*, Chicago. It is the author's conjecture that Benjamin Wilson used his own periodical to advance for a final time his views on communion, organization of the church, resurrection of the just and unjust, restoration of the Jews to their homeland and repudiation of mortal emergence.

Some of the confusion about Wilson's doctrinal loyalties arose because Benjamin Wilson shifted positions and alliances a couple of times in his career. Just as it was noted that Marsh's and Dr. Thomas' thoughts progressed in understanding, so did Wilson's.

This author's first question to Paul Hatch, upon reading all the Wilson, Marsh and Thomas materials in the early 1980s was, "Who was Benjamin Wilson? Was he Campbellite, Thomasite or Church of God?" Hatch answered, "He was Church of God." "How do we know that?" Hatch responded, "By his doctrine."⁵⁵

Yet Wilson remained fond of certain Thomasite teachings. He agreed with John Thomas on the rebaptism issue. He disagreed with Thomas on the nature of the resurrection, and the name Thomas chose for his sect.

⁵⁴ Benjamin Wilson, "New Year's Resolutions," *Gospel Banner and Millennial Advocate*, 7:1 (January 1, 1861), Geneva, Illinois, 3.

⁵⁵ Author's discussion with Paul Hatch, Church of God General Conference historian and author, Oregon, Illinois, circa 1982.

More importantly, Wilson began to debate also with men within the One Faith about the sequence of the resurrection.

Wilson believed in simultaneous resurrection, which is, the just and unjust would be raised at Christ's return for judgment or reward. Mark Allen of Woburn, Massachusetts, and Thomas Wilson, beloved nephew, believed that saints would be raised at Christ's coming, and the wicked raised at the end of the 1000 years for the second death, which is what Joseph Marsh taught (see Chart 1, on page 27). They cited Revelation 20:4-6 as their proof text. Wilson's final editorial comment, after the *Gospel Banner* was being merged with Thomas Wilson's *Herald* in 1869, was devoted to stating the argument for simultaneous resurrection.

His position was based upon the fact that the passage in question was omitted from the Syriac version and also the Codex Sinaiticus. He felt that it was a spurious passage and therefore it could not be sound to base a doctrine on Revelation 20:6. He said: "To teach that a thousand years will intervene between the resurrection of the righteous and the wicked, is to say what the Word of God does not warrant any one in saying. Let the brethren be careful neither to add to nor take from the Word. -EDITOR"⁵⁶

But the Church of God was leaning away from simultaneous resurrection toward the interpretation advanced by Mark Allen and Thomas Wilson.

It all came to a head at a conference of believers at Geneva, Illinois, in Kane County. As was their custom after each business meeting, at every conference, they discussed a specific topic for the purpose of instruction and edification. At this conference, the men chose to discuss the resurrection. Wilson was the only one advocating simultaneous resurrection. The others believed that all men would be raised, the just and the unjust to be judged or rewarded, the first when Jesus comes, the latter at the end of the 1000 years, which is the second death.⁵⁷

Benjamin Wilson had clearly lost the debate. He could not be persuaded to change his mind by the younger men. He rested his argument squarely on the Greek text.

⁵⁶ Benjamin Wilson, "Time of Resurrection," *Gospel Banner and Millennial Advocate*, 15:24 (December 15, 1869), 442, 443.

⁵⁷ Thomas Wilson, "Conference at Geneva," *Herald of the Coming Kingdom and Christian Instructor*, 2:2 (January 15, 1869), Chicago, Illinois, 46.

X. WILSON'S LEGACY

The *Diaglott* was a resounding success. The *Gospel Banner* was combined with the *Herald* and being edited by his nephew, Thomas Wilson. The lay leaders were strong enough to argue an old man into silence. He and his wife had just concluded a wonderful trip back to England the previous year, preached a little, met his family and old friends. All was well. Benjamin Wilson closed up shop, packed up household and family and moved to California.

Perhaps he was hurt, disgruntled, or angry, but hopefully, not. Benjamin Wilson had done what he set out to do: disciplined many leaders for the new church work. The official reason he relocated to the west coast was to find a better climate for his wife who had been ailing for a number of years.

The Wilson nephews carried on in the patriarch's absence, and from that point on, an occasional word was heard from Benjamin via letters to his family which were shared with only a few.

XI. THOMAS' LEGACY

While Benjamin Wilson was enjoying the accolades of his readers in the sunset years of his career because his printed works were so popular, John Thomas was fending off critics on several fronts and attempting to avoid schisms which threatened to split his denomination.

As already mentioned, many frontier believers of the One Faith were critical of Thomas to the point of hostility. Also fuming in a different sector of the world was David King, publisher of the *Ecclesiastical Observer* in Britain, who penned his famous piece railing against Thomas, on the occasion of Thomas' third tour of England in 1868. King warned the British Campbellites that Thomas may attempt to steal yet more members for his own purpose.⁵⁸

An equally important problem was exemplified by a letter of George Dowie to Wilson's *Gospel Banner* in 1869. He reviled Thomas for continuing to set a date for Christ's return in 1864, '65, '66, '67, '68 through his interpretation of Daniel 8:13, 14 using the day-year theory. He had popularized this idea through his book, *Elpis Israel*.⁵⁹ Even as late as 1869, Thomas was still defending his interpretation and explaining why Christ had not

⁵⁸ David King, "History and Mystery of Christadelphianism."

⁵⁹ There is a discrepancy between the page number offered in the *Gospel Banner*, 323, and the present editions of *Elpis Israel* regarding the citation about date setting. The explanation for this might be a simple typographical error, or perhaps a different pagination system was used for more recent editions or reprints of *Elpis Israel*.

come. Thomas said “Although Christ, at the end of forty-two months, did not come, yet the truth has asserted itself, and has been placed upon its feet, and maintains itself in the face of the enemy.”⁶⁰ Dowie considered that to be an inadequate explanation.

The overall effect of these controversies silenced many of Thomas’ followers, and disillusioned those who remained faithful to the doctrines. Many Christadelphians became adherents to the ideas of George Dowie, and came to be known as “Dowieites.”

XII. CONCLUSION

Joseph Marsh, John Thomas and Benjamin Wilson did not invent the Gospel of the Age to Come or One Faith doctrine. It was in the scriptures right along. Elias Smith first brought it to the forefront in America, and open-minded scholars took a look at it for the first time and were refreshed and invigorated by it.

The rise of the Zionist movement by the end of the nineteenth century vindicated the Age to Come preachers. The return of the Jews to their homeland and “old Jerusalem” resulted in the formation of the nation of Israel in 1948. This further established Age to Come students’ place in history as Bible scholars. They rightly divided the Word of God. Miller was wrong.

It is too narrow to say that either Joseph Marsh or Benjamin Wilson was the sole founder of either the Church of God General Conference or the smaller Church of God Abrahamic Faith. That simply is not true and interpreting the facts to say so is questionable scholarship. These groups arose out of a difficult struggle over many years from the foundations laid by Marsh and Wilson and many others.

The strength of the General Conference is that it traces its roots to many learned men who arrived at the doctrine of the Age to Come independent of each other, and pooled their common resources to propagate that very important and neglected doctrine. It is still a lively and refreshing doctrine and pertinent to the times in which we live.

⁶⁰ George Dowie, “Concerning the Fulfillment of Prophecy,” *Gospel Banner and Millennial Advocate*, Geneva, Illinois, 15:19 (October 1, 1869), 356-358.

Also see John Thomas, M.D., *Eureka*. In a 1968 reprint of the 1868 edition, the return of Christ is dated to 1865-66 in Volume 2, Part 2, 680 (Dawn Book Supply, London).

Also see John Thomas, M.D., *Anatolia*, Mott Haven, New York, 1854, 91. This copy is bound in with the *Gospel Banner and Millennial Advocate*, Geneva, Illinois, B. Wilson publisher, Volume 6, in the copy in the Atlanta Bible College Archives.

An argument can be made that the Church of God General Conference developed historically in reaction to the very strong forces generated first by William Miller and later by Dr. John Thomas. The statement of belief developed slowly over nearly a century by being weighed against the teachings of Miller and Thomas, Alexander Campbell playing a lesser role. Many doctrines were set aside as “heresies,” until the Committee of Ten successfully led a movement to organize the General Conference in 1921 in Waterloo, Iowa. Issues of doctrine essential for salvation continued to be discussed within the Church of God General Conference throughout the twentieth century.

While all these leaders seem to have had their cranky sides, it must be noted that all were tireless in their devotion to spread the truth of the scriptures. All were dedicated to helping people study the Bible. All were skilled teachers and used their talents in the work of the Lord. They gave their lives to advance the Gospel message of the Kingdom of God. They believed it with their whole hearts.

They just couldn’t agree on the details.

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Mrs. Stilson wishes to thank: Mark Mattison, David Graham, Daniel Smead, Church of God historians; Michael Casey, Carl P. Miller Chair of Communications at Pepperdine University and Restoration Movement historian; Paul Dover, Nottingham, England, Restoration Movement researcher and historian; for their helpful comments which assisted her in pulling this piece together to prepare it for publication. If the reader has questions or additional comments, please contact her at estilson@essex1.com

Mrs. Stilson’s next research project will be on the history of resurrection thought in the Age to Come movement.