

The Last Writings
Of
Dr. John Thomas

**Taking the form of a Letter
to an un-named Correspondent**

Followed by

COMMENTS

by

Russell Gregory

and

APPENDIX

by

Phil Parry

FOREWORD

I am pleased and honoured to introduce this last fragment of the writings of Dr. John Thomas, which concerns a subject of vital importance and interest. Although quite short, it is long enough to convey a clear idea of the message, or part of it, that he had in mind, and which manifestly does not support the BASF.

I particularly like his second paragraph, which castigates the propensity of many religious leaders to waffle over and above the heads of their flocks and also the little comment appended by his daughter, Mrs E.J.Lassius.

Dr. Thomas is careful to be very clear about the points he is making, and although the use of the word “spirit” is risky (the Shorter OED gives two large columns of the myriad diverse meanings and senses), he is meticulous in defining the particular sense in which he uses the word.

Like his daughter, we are sad that he could not complete this article, which might have made it impossible for Robert Roberts to de-rail the Christadelphian organization. I appreciate the thoughtful comments on this “Last Writing” by Russell Gregory, and his publication of this valuable fragment, for all those who would, to read, mark, and inwardly digest.

Dr. John Stevenson.

INTRODUCTION

Dr Thomas died on the 5th March 1871, at which time he was in the midst of writing an article for the Christadelphian entitled “What is Flesh?” It appears in the form of a letter to some un-named correspondent. Although this is an unfinished letter, it is worth reading through two or three times in order to fully appreciate Dr. Thomas’s understanding.

Russell Gregory

The Last Writings of Dr John Thomas

WHAT IS FLESH?

“I would suggest, that discussion of the very knotty and intricate subject of the *quo modo* of the manifestation of Deity in flesh be suspended among you, till each member of the ecclesia be furnished with a copy of my forthcoming *Pictorial Illustration* and explanatory *Key*. In the meantime, it may not be amiss for our metaphysical friends to see if they can agree among themselves with regard to the more simple, proximate, and primary question, What is flesh? before they undertake to speculate dogmatically concerning the manifestation of Deity in flesh, who is spirit.

You will excuse me, perhaps, just reminding you here that metaphysics are of a very unsubstantial and shadowy nature. As a system, it is a science so-called that treats of things immaterial, and, therefore, intangible and ethereal, or visionary; and which may be considered quite beyond the sphere of all profitable enquiry by plain, unphilosophical men, whose faith is based upon the revealed testimony of God, and not upon the *modus in quo*, or manner in which essences are generated; and how entities and quiddities* are induced. We can believe the testimony of John, that Deity can of stones raise up children to Abraham, with a true and valid faith, which is not at all impaired by our metaphysical inability to explain the process by which he is able to arrive at such a result; for the faith which saves men is the belief of testimony divinely given, not a metaphysical or scientific comprehension of processes. Metaphysics are capital things for ‘doubtful disputation,’ and admirably adapted to the development of ‘sounding brass and tinkling cymbals.’ Let our friends, therefore, who would grow in the knowledge of God and in His favour, eschew metaphysics, by which they can be neither enlightened nor improved; for, as they say in Scotland, which has been befuddled and befooled by the science falsely so-called: “Metaphysics, is when twa men talk thegither, and the ane who hears dinna ken what the ither says; and the ane who speaks dinna ken what he says himsel.”

To give our friends a start then, towards the solution of the primary and proximate question of *What is flesh?* they will, perhaps, allow me to direct their attention to what He who made all flesh says it is. The spirit in David testifies, in Psalm lxxviii, 39, that *flesh is spirit that passeth away, and cometh not again.* The common version says ‘flesh’ is ‘a wind;’ but in the Hebrew, the word is *ruach*, which in Genesis 1:2 is translated *spirit*, as also in a multitude of other places. Flesh then, is spirit, if we are to believe the word. Hence, Peter, all of whose ideas that were really good, came from the spirit, styles the dead antediluvians, who were flesh in common with ourselves, ‘spirits in prison.’ But if you and I, and all mankind, and other beasts in general, be spirit, what is the most obvious difference in view of the divine testimony, between men and angels, who are incorruptible and deathless? Men and angels are both spirit in a certain sense; for in Scripture they are both styled spirits; only the one class *a little lower than* the other: what, then, is the most obvious or striking difference between the two kinds of spirit, or nature, the human and angelic? It is this: human nature in general, is *spirit that passeth away, and cometh not again;* while angelic, or divine nature, or substance, is *spirit that doth not pass away, and is therefore incorruptible and immortal.*

There is, of necessity, an essential difference between these two kinds of spirits, which constitute the one kind transitory, and the other permanent. This difference is not obvious. It is beyond the ken of the generality. There is a constitutional difference made between them by the Creator, and upon such a basis that the one can readily and instantaneously be transformed or made to pass into the other. This is a question not of essence, but of *organization*, which metaphysicians and theosophists have not been able to expound.

Now in illustration of this, let us consider the relations of steam-power and the metal, iron. Look abroad and behold the almost infinite diversity of results, operated by steam-power through iron. If the iron be in the state simply of ore, bar, or pig, steam power develops nothing; and for the obvious reason, that the iron is in a raw, crude and unorganized condition. But suppose that by the wisdom and science of the artificer, the iron is made to assume the form of the machinery of an ocean steamer, and steam power be applied, what then? The iron fabric is set in motion, and the vessel is propelled by the steam-power through the deep. Now, the same steam-power will spin and weave cotton, print newspapers and grind corn; but will the steam-power spin, weave, print and grind, by setting in motion the machinery of a steam-ship? Why not; it is iron machinery and steam-power? True; but the artistic organization of the metal is not adapted to such results. Steam-power and iron will spin, weave, print, grind and do anything else, if the power be applied to iron properly and scientifically organized.

Thus much by way of illustration. Now, for steam-power, let us substitute divine creative-power; and for iron ore, the dust of the ground. This abstract relation of elements develops no spiritual or mental and physical phenomena. Why? There is the wisdom and power that can do all things, and there is the material for developments? True; but the dust of the ground is not organized. It must be artistically developed into diversities of machinery, that each diversity may give development to diversity of results. If the creative power, which is spirit, organize the dust of the ground into different kinds of living machines or organisms, these are *spirit-forms*, which become capable of giving expression to an almost infinite variety of operations. These spirit-forms are styled by Moses, "the spirits of all flesh," to which Adam gave appropriate names, when the Creating-Power, 'in whom they lived and moved and had their being,' caused them to pass in review before him. One of these spirits was a lion, another an elephant, a third a horse, and so forth. We all know what sort of spirit-manifestation can be displayed through the high mettled spirit-form conventionally termed horse; why cannot the same results be operated through a sloth or an elephant? It is the same power that works in them all to do or act? Because the animal-machine termed elephant, is a dust-of-the-ground organization of a peculiar contrivance designed for elephantine and not equine manifestations. It is the Creator's artistic organization of the dust of the ground that gives diversity of expression or manifestation to His power, on which account He is styled by Moses, 'the Elohim of the Spirits of all Flesh.'

According to the constitution of the organism, so is the manifestation of results. Divine Power has made spirit out of the dust of the ground, and called it Man. He has so made or organized it that if not further interfered with by His power, it may pass away. This is called flesh, or spirit that passeth away; and, under ordinary conditions, cometh not again. The human organism is the most perfect of all animal-machines; hence its mental or spiritual manifestations are of a higher and more perfect order than all the rest. His more perfect cerebral organization is the long sort for, but hitherto never found boundary line between instinct and reason. The transforming energy of divine power will convert spirit that passeth away into spirit that passeth not away. They who may be the subject of this operation will be exalted to equality with the angels, whose substance doth not waste nor pass away...."

*Quiddity = inherent nature.

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In reporting the above letter, Dr Thomas's daughter wrote: -

“And with this sentence, appropriate to the last, the Dr. laid down his pen, to lift it no more in the arduous work in which he had spent his life; and spent it not in vain... The foregoing article shows that the Dr's marvellous intellect remained vigorous to the last. The reading of it naturally leads to the thought expressed by a dear friend who, on finishing the perusal of it, said, “What a pity so great a mind should cease to work,” at a time too when it is so much needed!”

COMMENT

We must not be intimidated by Dr. Thomas's language; his title “What is flesh?” leaves us in no doubt that he was answering this very question.

In his argument, Dr. Thomas rejects any change (*meta*) in Adam's physical nature at the Fall and states that he was created so that natural death was to be the end of him unless God chose otherwise. This is seen most clearly towards the end of the article when Dr Thomas writes:-

“Divine Power made spirit out of the dust of the ground, and called it Man. He has so made or organized it that if not further interfered with by His power, it may pass away. This is called flesh, or spirit that passeth away; and under ordinary conditions, cometh not again.”

It may be the view Dr Thomas was opposing was widespread, whether this was the case or not, it is very clear that there were quite a number who were doubting his teaching and were arguing for belief in the changed flesh of Adam at the Fall, a belief common and widespread in the 19th century, at a time when so many new sects were starting up. Most of these newly formed sects embraced this belief but Dr Thomas is here rejecting it outright, reminding them

“that metaphysics are of a very unsubstantial and shadowy nature. As a system, it is a science so-called that treats of things immaterial, and, therefore, intangible and ethereal, or visionary and which may be considered quite beyond the sphere of all profitable enquiry by plain, unphilosophical men, whose faith is based upon the revealed testimony...”

It was Dr. Thomas's intention to address this discontent and not allow false teaching to take hold and one can only speculate that had he lived a few more years that he, along with Edward Turney, who believed the same, would have settled the matter once and for all, and Robert Roberts could never have turned the Christadelphian community upside down by his brilliant but misguided rhetoric in choosing rather to adopt the view Dr. Thomas was here opposing.

Indeed, what a great pity Dr Thomas was not allowed to continue his work for a few more years just when it was so much needed. However, let us not forget the Lord works in mysterious ways.

What now? The Christadelphian Establishment knows it is facing a growing challenge. The whole body is in continual crisis. There is more unrest than ever before. There are more divisions than ever before. Letters such as that from the Belfast (Balmoral) ecclesia in May 2002, sent to all ecclesias, are proof of growing discontent and dissatisfaction throughout the body. The Testimony magazine also for May 2002 is another attempt to stem the tide. In it we read such things as,

“Why is it that we appear to be losing our edge, our sharpness, our vitality... there is a blandness about us... The forgiveness of our sins, and our salvation in Christ, no longer humble us and bring us to our knees... The uncomfortable truth we have to face is that we lack the faith and the conviction that our beliefs demand of us...”

Dr. Thomas set an example to us all in doing his utmost to get as close to the true understanding of the Scriptures as he possibly could, yet from the foregoing article it is abundantly clear he would not have approved of the B.A.S.F. and would indeed have vigorously opposed it; it could never have been formulated while he was alive. Some of the elements of the Statement of Faith were not preached by the apostles, and other churches are found to be just as close to the Scriptures as are Christadelphians but they too, have faulty doctrines which originated in the Roman Catholic system.

Perhaps one day there may arise ecclesias which claim to be Non-BASF but it is my opinion that if such should happen then it would involve only a small number. For over 125 years there have been a handful of so-called Clean-flesh heretics proclaiming the truth of these matters. It would indeed be an encouragement to us to see this number grow, but the Lord knows who are His, and knowing this, we are content to cast our bread upon the waters to the honour and glory of God.

Yet there have always been Christadelphians who have known these things. Why haven't they been heard? Because they have not been allowed to speak what they know; they have been told 'not to rock the boat;' they have been intimidated and silenced by 'those who know better,' though we have heard occasionally that these things have been spoken of from the platform, and no one seems to have noticed, but some have been cast out as Clean-flesh heretics.

It is imperative every Christadelphian seriously considers where this present situation leaves him or her. The challenge facing the Christadelphian establishment has never been greater.

How can they change their Statement of Faith to embrace the teachings of Dr. Thomas. How can they turn around and tell the rank and file

- that natural death is not the result of, nor punishment for sin;
- that flesh did not change at the fall.
- that there is no such thing as sin in the flesh;
- that Jesus Christ did not have to die for Himself.
- that it is now necessary to find another reason for the crucifixion and explain the Atonement in quite different terms than hitherto.

If Jesus was not compelled to die for his sinful flesh then why did God require the death of an innocent man?

There is no stopping place along the road to a true understanding of the Atonement once belief in a changed flesh is forsaken. A logical explanation of why Christ gave His life for our redemption can be clearly seen by those who have travelled that road, but for some it is a big task, because it means accepting 'substitution' which, for so long, has been a blackened word in Christadelphia. However, it is not widely recognized that there are two types of 'Substitution;' one evil and the other righteous. To punish an innocent man in order to let the guilty go free, is indeed evil, but if a good and kindly man pays off a debt owed by a poor man who is unable to pay it himself, then, this is Christian teaching - "Bear ye one another's burdens." This is what Jesus did in giving His life for ours.

But one thing is certain - there is no halfway house, or to change the metaphor, one cannot jump over a gate and stop halfway. I am convinced there are many good people in the Christadelphian community. May God give them the courage of their convictions to do what they know should be done - Seek ye first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness. The reward is unspeakable joy!

Russell Gregory
(2004)

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APPENDIX

At the start of this booklet we are informed that Dr Thomas died 5th March 1871 at which time he was in the midst of writing an article entitled “What is flesh?” We are also informed that although that is an unfinished letter, it is worth reading through two or three times in order to fully appreciate Dr Thomas’s understanding. While this may be true in general of many different subjects, it is shown in the above Comment that Christadelphians, though they have laid so much stress and conviction on the works of Dr Thomas, had read them effectively would have found him declaring truth in one place and contradicting it in another.

Dr Thomas’ article “What Is Flesh?” though unfinished is true so far as he limits flesh to its physical quality as he taught in Elpis Israel, chapter 2, page 35 where he stated of the nature of Jesus was identical with the very good created nature of Adam. This then is the simple answer to his question “What is Flesh?” and there is nothing more added than what he explains here as a physical corruptible nature capable of death and destined to die if left to itself without change to the superior nature of the Angels.

Why then the inconsistent use of terms where the Dr describe the flesh of Jesus as “Sin’s Flesh” and “Sinful Flesh” when he has already said the flesh of Jesus was identical in quality with that of Adam when created? Some accused him of being inconsistent but He himself said, “If necessary I will change my mind every day until I get it right at last.”

Adam was not “Sinful Flesh” nor was he “Sin’s Flesh” at creation, and neither term can describe Jesus’ flesh; He was Flesh as Dr. Thomas has described it at the start and in Elpis Israel chapter 2, page 35.

Now on the matter of Adam’s sin and its penalty we have confirmation of the Dr’s view in opposition to that of Robert Roberts in the following quotations in dealing with the subject of how the sentence of death came into operation.

Robert Roberts said: “It required what men called a miracle to depress (Adam) to the level of the beasts that perish” (Robert Roberts in “The Visible Hand of God,” pp 19,20).

But Dr Thomas said: “Seeing that Adam had become a transgressor of Divine Law there was no need of a miracle for the infliction of death all that was necessary was to prevent him from eating of the Tree of Life and to leave his flesh and blood nature to the operation of the laws peculiar to it. It was not a nature formed for interminable existence.” (“Eureka,” Vol. I page 248).

As far as the operation of the physical law of natural or common death is concerned Dr Thomas is correct and R.Roberts incorrect, yet neither of their statements agree with Genesis 2:16,17 for eating of the forbidden fruit is braking the law and requires a legal sentence of death not the implantation of a physical law changing Adam’s nature; it is a legal sentence of death related to blood-shedding for the taking away of life forfeited to a transgressed law which governs the position.

Dr Thomas in Eureka Vol.1 page 248 does not describe the penalty for Adam’s sin but the result of his life being provisionally spared through the blood of the lamb foreshadowing Jesus. And though Dr Thomas in “Elpis Israel” states of Jesus being the “Substitutional Testator” (Elpis Israel, page 213) he has not rid himself of the idea of natural death being the penalty for sin. He should have realised that the death of Jesus was not by natural decay but by the shedding of blood and that without the shedding of blood is no remission of sin. We wonder then “into what death was he and his followers baptised?” For as Paul states, there is only one baptism. If Christ be a substitute it could only be for the death incurred by Adam which was judicial in scripture teaching, “by the shedding of blood” the

mode of death Jesus suffered for all, that the world through him might be saved and is operative on the principle of belief, understanding and faith.

In the light of this it should appear strange to the surface reader a description of the meaning of Redemption in Christ put forward by Dr. Thomas in Eureka where he stresses the importance of the blood of Christ the conveyor of natural life being the Ransom price to make free from the Law of Sin and Death which he mistakenly believed to be a fixation of physical decay ending in natural death. His explanation of redemption proves that the subject of redemption experience no physical change. I will quote what he states in Eureka;

“Redemption is release for a Ransom; all who become God’s servants have been released from a former lord by purchase, the purchaser is God and the Ransom paid, the precious blood of Christ as of a lamb without spot and without blemish.”

Now in Romans 8:1-2 Paul speaks of himself in the present tense and converted to Christ, he himself being now a subject of the redeeming blood of Christ yet not having died physically, he says, “There is therefore now no condemnation to them who are in Christ Jesus who walk not after the flesh” i.e. unregenerated in minds, see Romans 7:4-6 and 8:5-19. It is worthwhile reading all the above and ask your conscience what happened to Paul’s so called sinful-condemned flesh? - for he was physically alive when he wrote the above chapters.

Some have posed the question in the past, “Who is the former lord from which God’s servants had been released or made free?” In the above references Paul has answered, and Dr. Thomas has confirmed that answer, but if you are still unconvinced due to the unscriptural ‘sinful-condemned flesh’ bias received by vain tradition and Apostasy, read what Paul says in Romans 6:11-22 to those believers and present servants of God who had not died physically nor risen from literal death, yet in such an exalted position through the love of God and the grace of His Son, released from a former lord by the Ransom paid.

I refer now to the letter written by Dr Thomas’s daughter, (page 5); yet what I have written regarding Dr Thomas’s failure to see that the death Adam incurred by sin was not the death he experienced at the age of 930 years, does not detract from what his daughter has written and also the respect we have for his intelligence and spiritual motives.

I recommend the enlightening Comments on pages 5 to 9 and I am of the same opinion that if the Dr. had lived to the time when Edward Turney and David Handley were exchanging views with Robert Roberts their views would preferably have been addressed to Dr. Thomas, call this mere assumption if you choose but it was not to be and Russell Gregory has exposed the result.

In conclusion and in reading of the preaching of the disciples of Jesus involving the necessity of understanding their Gospel message of why Jesus died an inflicted death by giving his life in the blood, it should be recognised therefore on that basis in Acts 13:47,48 “And as many as were ordained to eternal life believed.” If this is not present day judgment, words have no meaning.

Phil Parry (2004)