

The History of the Christadelphians in Eastern Europe

Introduction

1. Locating the Christadelphians
2. Until the fall of Communism
 - 2.1 Regional Religious Background
 - 2.2 Christadelphians Before the Fall of Communism
3. Early Beginnings 1988 - 1997
 - 3.1 Esperanto
 - 3.2 The Dawn Christadelphians
 - 3.2.1 In the Former USSR
 - 3.2.2 In the Rest of Eastern Europe
 - 3.3 The Christadelphian Bible Mission
4. Unity and Division 1996-1997
5. Growth and Expansion 1997 – 2002
6. Further Division 2002-2004
7. The Current Situation: Growth and Expansion 2008-2012
 - 7.1 In the Former USSR
 - 7.2 In the Rest of Eastern Europe
 - 7.3 The Special Case of the Baltic States
 - 7.4 The Eastern European Diaspora
8. Future Prospects
9. Relocating the Christadelphians

Introduction

There is no such thing as pure history in the sense of bald facts merely recorded. All history is to some degree interpretation. And no history is complete in itself; for no single historian has complete knowledge of nor appreciation of all the factors at work in the period and subject being described. Biblical history is an account of God's people and His relationship with them. But this history likewise is selective, paying fine attention to some individuals and incidents and very little if any to other incidents which were all the same significant for the lives and development of God's people. In setting about writing a history of some of God's people in a specific geographical area, nobody can hope to set down every fact nor ultimately discern the significance of every set of events. My advantage as a historian of the Christadelphians in Eastern Europe is that I was probably the most heavily involved of any living person in the whole wonderful story. I therefore have more access to facts than perhaps anyone else. The related disadvantage, of course, is that I will present the story as I see it, with all the human bias of someone personally and emotionally involved. So I ask you to cut me some slack- because anyone attempting this task will be hampered by the same problems: Lack of facts at one end of the spectrum, and personal involvement at the other end.

But why even attempt this history? One reason is purely practical. I am one of the few still alive who lived in Eastern Europe from the beginning of Christadelphian work there until the present day. I spent those 25 years almost constantly on the road throughout the region, teaching, baptizing, and shepherding; picking up several of the languages in the process. Having baptized the majority of the few thousand Christadelphians in Eastern Europe, and taking some pastoral concern for them in subsequent years, I am often asked 'for the history'. And limits of time and circumstance mean I give only part of it. I owe it to all of us to give a more detailed story.

The other reason is I suppose the reason for all spiritual history- so that we can see where we are coming from, the mistakes we've made, the examples of success, the potentials which God raised up and which were both used and wasted... and partially used. And to thereby discern where He is leading us, so that we might respond better. And I do this simply in the hope that someone somewhere *will* finally learn from history, the famous quip notwithstanding that the only thing we learn from history is that nobody learns anything from it. The faith of the Christadelphians could yet become the cutting edge in Eastern European society; in this part of the world at least, communities holding the one Faith, whether or not they use the name "Christadelphian", could yet become the light of the whole world.

Any history of God's people is sad, even tragic. The Old Testament is full of such pathos. The glory days of God's beloved people are yet to come. God is a realist, and His Biblical history is no national legend, endlessly glorifying occasional heroism and reinterpreting or skimming over the centuries of humdrum mediocrity of response and feeling towards Him; far less the simple fact that both natural and spiritual Israel have alike failed to adequately respond to the riches of grace extended to them. The record of that failure, however, is not merely the doing of authentic, honest history on God's part as the ultimate author. Rather is it recorded in such a way as to inspire subsequent generations to learn and reach forward to the imitation of the mind of Christ. My references to our individual and communal failures should be understood in that spirit. And of course there are the stories of Davids against Goliaths, which the Bible also records as inspiration to subsequent generations. There are such elements also in the history of Christadelphia in Eastern Europe. And likewise I do not record them for the sake of showing what the human spirit is capable of when deeply motivated; but rather to show what is possible for those who truly wish to spread the Gospel against all odds.

Ultimately, all history is His-Story. Every person baptized into Christ is in a sense baptized by God working through His Spirit (1 Cor. 6:11; 12:13; Tit. 3:5). God is in search of man; not only to baptize men and women, but to populate His eternal Kingdom through leading individuals to the new life and transformation of personality which is in Christ. The first 25 years of the history of Christadelphia in Eastern Europe is without doubt His-Story. God at work. And God seeking to be at work in the lives and minutiae of thousands of human lives. You, in your context, are equally exposed to His working, wherever you may be. God works according to patterns; and even if you are not involved personally in His work in Eastern Europe, you too will experience the same pattern of work, in essence, in your life.

“Now to Him that is able to do immeasurably above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us, to Him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations for ever and ever. Amen” (Eph. 3:20.21).

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I am grateful to Steve Cook for his insights into the 19th century history of Christadelphia in chapter 1; and to Jean Field for information about Christadelphian work in Esperanto in chapter 3.

1. Locating the Christadelphians

Christadelphia arose out of the Barton-Stone movement in 19th century America- along with Adventism, the Church of God, and the movement that later became known as the Jehovah's Witnesses. But let me set the scene. Many Bible-reading Protestants had emigrated to North America, and cut off from their home churches back in Europe, they were free to think for themselves about doctrinal matters. The nature of European colonization of America meant that people were often geographically isolated, without experienced pastors. Yet their faith in Christ and love of the Bible continued. It was an exciting time spiritually, and a fertile field for Protestantism at its best. Relatively freed from the shackles of denominationalism, Godly Christian people started to think for themselves. Some came to reject the Trinity, the personal pre-existence of Christ, a personal Satan, hell as a place of literal fire, heaven as the reward of the righteous, the immortal soul... They replaced these ideas with a belief that Jesus was the Son of God promised throughout the Old Testament, who whilst being the Son of God, never sinned and had genuine human nature, only coming into literal existence through His birth of Mary. Great focus was placed upon the promises to Abraham- of a literal Kingdom on earth, to be given to those who were part of his "seed" through baptism by adult immersion into Christ. Hell was interpreted as the grave, the Holy Spirit was understood as the power of God rather than a personal Deity. Human nature was found, Biblically, to be essentially mortal; the soul was not to be understood as immortal. And some came to interpret 'satan' as a word meaning merely an adversary, sometimes referring to sin and internal temptation within human beings. Nobody believed *all* those things. One person maybe rejected the immortal soul but not the Trinity; another rejected hell as a place of fire but continued to believe in a personal Satan. These movements of thought and interpretation were held by some people in some places, whilst for the most part remaining members of more standard denominations. The ideas were communicated through various magazines and occasional meetings.

Influences Upon John Thomas in 19th Century America

The genius of John Thomas, the English doctor who founded the Christadelphians, was not that he worked out each of these issues for himself; but rather that he cherry picked these ideas from various individuals and groups who held them, and put them all together in a coherent theology, enshrined in his book *Elpis Israel* (first published in 1848). The survival of archive copies of these magazines has enabled us to piece together from where John Thomas picked up his ideas. He wrote in a number of them, and edited his own magazine, *The Herald*. An analysis of the religious journals with which John Thomas was associated reveals the following influences upon him:

- The ***Christian Connection*** and the ***Freewill Baptists*** - Non Trinitarian, open table.
- **Joseph Marsh**- The promises to Abraham as the basis of the Gospel of the Kingdom of God on earth
- **Barton Stone**- No trinity, but Stone believed in the pre-existence of Christ. **Barton Stone, Thomas Campbell** and **Alexander Campbell** became known as the *Restoration Movement* because they were also endeavouring to *restore* primitive Christianity.

- **George Storrs** – No immortal soul. Thomas severely criticised Storrs for not being baptised (1853). He stopped referring to him as "brother Storrs" and he became a "Mr".
- **Elias Smith** – Hell as the grave
- **Benjamin & Thomas Wilson**- No pre-existence of Christ, no Trinity, no personal Devil. **George Dowie** (disfellowshipped by Robert Roberts in 1864) and **Robert Ashcroft** (disfellowshipped by Robert Roberts in 1884) in the UK allied themselves with **Benjamin Wilson's** group;

The bullet points of Christadelphian theology as codified by John Thomas were:

- The Bible as the inspired, infallible word of God
- Jesus as Son of God and representative man, of human nature
- God as a single personal being and not a Trinity
- The Holy Spirit as the power of God, not a personal being
- Hell as the grave not a place of literal fire
- Satan as an adversary, sometimes referring to human nature, and not a fallen Angel
- The promises to Abraham and David necessitating Jesus to have been their direct descendant, not pre-existent, and requiring the return of Christ to establish God's Kingdom on earth
- Baptism by immersion of adults
- The hope of bodily resurrection at Christ's return rather than an immortal soul.

It has been to the credit of the Christadelphians that these doctrinal positions have remained intact over 170 years.

The Formation of "The Christadelphians"

The individuals and local churches in America which were later to be called Christadelphian initially resisted a denominational name. Throughout the USA and Britain these churches generally went by the names of *Believers*, *Baptised Believers*, the *Royal Association of Believers*, *Baptised Believers in the Kingdom of God*, and other similar names. They were part of a *movement* not really *denominations*, and were all characterized by an open table attitude to the Lord's table. It wasn't until 1864 that many of these Believers churches began to adopt the new denominational name coined by John Thomas: *Christadelphians*. In New York they had adopted the title "The Royal Association of Believers" but that was felt to be unsuitable for the purpose of securing exemption from military service at the time of the American civil war. In order to help obtaining exemption from military service, the name Christadelphian was registered in 1864 by the Coffman brothers, who were politically active (only later did Christadelphia outlaw involvement in politics).

The Divisions of 1864-1885

In England, Robert Roberts was the one largely responsible for turning Christadelphia into a denomination with clear cut boundaries. Between 1864 and 1885 there were at least 6 divisions within the Christadelphian denomination. The main ones were caused by the disfellowships of George Dowie in 1864, Edward Turney in 1873 and Robert Ashcroft in 1885. Any who disagreed with these brethren being disfellowshipped were in their turn disfellowshipped. Robert Roberts founded

a magazine, *The Ambassador*, which he later renamed *The Christadelphian*. He sought to make this the official mouthpiece of the denomination he had created, and reading the early issues reveals a very bitter attitude to any who disagreed with him. For example, we can note how he no longer referred to "Brother Dealtry" but started calling him "Mr. Dealtry", and disfellowshipped his converts, demanding that they be "re-immersed and organized as a Christadelphian ecclesia". This kind of attitude has consistently emanated from those in Birmingham who see themselves as running the Christadelphian community. This attitude has continued, for we shall see later how the demand that the majority of those baptized in Eastern Europe be re-baptized caused similar friction in the fledgling community there. Roberts also proclaimed "The Birmingham Statement of Faith" as the basis of true Christadelphian fellowship. He later amended it (raising the question of whether it really ever encapsulated 'saving truth') and called it the Birmingham Amended Statement of Faith [BASF]. He was the sole power broker. No other statement of faith was acceptable; and to this day, the dwindling conservative element in Christadelphia insist upon fellowship only upon the BASF. What Robert Roberts chose to overlook was that by 1885, there were at least as many people bearing the name Christadelphian who did not fellowship upon the BASF as there were those whom he had forced to accept it. That is the same situation today, even more so, as we shall see in the context of Eastern Europe. The Riga or Kiev or Moscow Statements of Faith are not accepted by the Christadelphian Magazine; they would be power brokers who have taken the mantle of Robert Roberts insist only upon the BASF. Here we can see history repeating itself. Most currently bearing the name Christadelphian are unfamiliar with the BASF and the majority of Christadelphia now doesn't know English (especially in Eastern Europe) and are unfamiliar with this document. But the same was true throughout Christadelphian history, right from its inception.

An Analysis of 1864-1885: The Emergence of a Denomination

In this period sociologist Bryan Wilson refers to a "series of bitter schisms. Excommunication of members and of one ecclesia by another became a common pattern in the attempt to maintain purity of doctrine and association. Whilst undoubtedly some schisms were at least partly a consequence of struggles for informal influence between leading brethren, there was always a strong concern for obedience to the word of God which led to over-scrupulousness, to purging evil men who arose in the fellowship, and hence to divisiveness" [Bryan Wilson, *Religious Sects a sociological study*, World University Library, London, 1970, p 109]. In his *Religion in Secular Society* (C.A. Watts & Co, London, 1966, pp 211-212) Bryan Wilson writes of sects which "have changed ... in a way rather less influenced by the immediate environment, and rather more in accordance with essentially internal pressures. Thus some revolutionist sects have tended over time...to become more preoccupied with the means of their own insulation from the wider society. They have tended to become more concerned with the condition of their own society, with their own inner holiness. Sometimes ... they have developed the **proclivity for schism** within, often over matters which to the outsider seem **trivial in the extreme**... The Christadelphians have shown marked tendencies in this direction". Robert Roberts himself confessed: "A state of comparative prosperity ten years ago has been succeeded by one of strife, division and obstruction" (*The Christadelphian*, 1890). On the basis of figures provided by Roberts in *The Christadelphian*, there were about 6,000 brethren in the 'central' fellowship in 1884, and less than 3,000 the year after. Bryan Wilson wrote that "Barely a month passed without a division in some ecclesia".

Steve Cook summarized the changes in his blog on Christadelphian history:

- There was a shift from the openness to change, from the exciting and lively debate, and the tolerance of the early years, towards a *rigid dogmatism*.
- As Christadelphians became less tolerant of alternative views there was a shift from *diversity* to *division*.
- With increasing *organisation* came an increase in *authoritarianism*.

Strangely, Robert Roberts allowed one phrase from the earlier spirit of Christadelphia to remain. In *Guide to the Conduct and Formation of Christadelphian Ecclesias* ("The Ecclesial Guide") on which many ecclesial constitutions are based, we read: "That we recognize as brethren, and welcome to our fellowship, all who have been immersed (by whomsoever) after their acceptance of the same doctrines and precepts". There was not a demand for re-baptism of those wanting to get involved with the Christadelphian movement. This changed, even though the wording has been retained. It is a reminder of the earlier, open spirit of Christadelphia. That open spirit of searching for Truth was found very clearly in the writings of John Thomas: "Must I ever hold to one belief for the sake of consistency? May such a calamity never befall me. I will change my mind every day if need be until I get it right at last". We compare this to the crude dogmatism of Robert Roberts: "To the charge of holding 'that the knowledge of Scripture, in the writings of Dr Thomas, has reached a finality', we plead guilty... in the writings of Dr Thomas, *the truth is developed as a finality*, and that they are a depot of the Christian doctrine" (*The Christadelphian*, September, 1874, pp. 408-9).

There is a human tendency to find and glorify a human founder, and to consider oneself faithful to the tradition started by man. The history of religion reveals this very strongly. To have no other foundation but Christ- which is what Paul pleaded for in 1 Cor. 3:11- is very difficult. Because it's human nature to want to follow a man rather than the Lord. Robert Roberts set up John Thomas as just such a founding father, whose words must be treated as somehow from God although not quite Divinely inspired. To this day, the history of Christadelphia in Eastern Europe bears the marks of this wrong approach. For there was at one time a move to get the works of John Thomas not only translated into local languages, but to be treated as impossible to agree with; on the faulty basis that he had allegedly "discovered the Truth". But we have demonstrated above that John Thomas cherry picked the ideas of others rather than actually discovering very much by his own Biblical research. Brother Joseph Chamberlin (disfellowshipped by Robert Roberts) observed: "So, nearly every teaching to be found in Dr. T.'s final publications may be found in some fragmentary form or another up and down the theological literature of the world, but nowhere can be found that harmonious system in which these parts are seen crystalising together" ('Sketches of John Thomas, M.D.', *The Aeon*, April 10, 1885). It is quietly overlooked by some that much of John Thomas' writings were speculations about the fulfilment of Bible prophecy- and his speculations have simply not stood the test of time. "The truth" was hardly "developed as a finality" in his writings, as Robert Roberts and his spiritual successors have liked to claim.

The Twentieth Century

By the end of the 19th Century, the Christadelphian community had moved from a movement of thought to a denomination. But it was divided into mutually exclusive 'fellowships'; the Unamended Fellowship, who refused to agree to Roberts' "Birmingham Ammended Statement of Faith", and various smaller splinter groups, mainly in England. At any one time in the history of

Christadelphia, there have been those who have left Christadelphia, or been excluded from it, who still hold the same basic teachings; and others who have jettisoned one or more of those teachings. This is how things are today in Christadelphia, but it is how they have been throughout the community's history.

The demand for the disfellowship of those who fellowship those who differ on some point of understanding continued throughout the 20th Century, resulting in over 100 mutually exclusive 'fellowships' of Christadelphians developing, each refusing to fellowship the other. The sadness of this situation became compounded when those groups then started to preach the Gospel and baptize people, who were then pressured to accept the very specific foibles of the group who baptized them. Personal loyalty to those who had introduced them to the Gospel meant that the converts remained loyal to the groups who baptized them, and this was often confirmed in the poorer world by giving material welfare on the basis that "You are isolated and the only member [of, e.g., "The Dawn fellowship"] in your country, therefore we'll provide you with..." computers, cash, trips to England for fellowship etc. If the person in question were to join a larger Christadelphian group, they wouldn't get all those "extras"... and thus people became tied in to the group who baptized them, and the divisions were never really solved. When the various fellowships in turn subdivided, as they nearly all did, there was often a crisis of faith amongst the converts. In the poorer world, this was often associated with a bidding process for loyalty, with the splinter group offering very attractive welfare packages [as happened when the Watchmen fellowship broke from the Dawn fellowship and sought the loyalty of the Dawn members in India].

The reality is that Christadelphia is divided into nearly 100 small groups who are all mutually exclusive of each other, traditionally identifying themselves around a magazine they published. Examples include the following fellowships: Berean, Dawn, The Ecclesia of Christ, The Remnant of Christ's Ecclesia, The Purley Fellowship, The Watchmen, The Old Paths, The Wayfarers, The Master's Household, Antipas, The Apostolics etc. There are many other small groups without any particular name nor magazine. The main body of Christadelphia is known as "The Amended Fellowship" (because they amended the Statement of Faith) or "The Central Fellowship" after the "Central Hall" in Birmingham UK which came to claim a leadership role in the community. But this group is also less officially subdivided into many factions who in reality do not mix with each other, may or may not recognize each others' baptisms, and may or may not break bread with each other. The factions within the Central Fellowship typically operated around magazines, e.g. Logos, Endeavour, The Bible Student, The Christadelphian, The Gospel News, The Bible Missionary, The Shield etc. Whilst nearly all of those magazines are still published in hard copy, division tends now to be based around websites / forum groups.

The relevance of this history for Eastern Europe is that the converts made there have tended to divided in the same way as their brethren in the West. Perhaps that is simply human nature, and the fate of Christian communities; or it may be that to some extent that was reinforced by the example set by the Western Christadelphian community. When it comes to missionary work, it needs to be noted that throughout the 20th Century, the leaders of the various Christadelphian groups have not been noted for missionary work nor any great interest in preaching the Gospel. Whilst they may have visited "the mission field" to speak at Bible Schools in a pastoral context, most of them had never brought a single person to Christ by their own personal contact. That observation is significant when it is combined with another observation: Some of the most active, successful and dynamic

preachers and converters of others within Christadelphia were hounded by the leadership of the various Christadelphian factions and either marginalized within or disfellowshipped from the faction of Christadelphia they were associated with. The list is long and could easily be added to: Alan Eyre [Jamaica]; Peter Watkins [UK]; Alan Hayward [UK]; Marcus Heaster [UK]; Peter Pickering [AU]; Barry Hodson [NZ]; Richard Mysambosa [Malawi]; Nic Willis [UK]; Ludmila Kuritsyna [Kazakhstan]; Ludmila Chernyakhovets [Ukraine]; Mike Warren [USA]; Andrej Boldetsov [Russia]; Harry Whittaker [UK]. Clearly enough, a group as inward looking as the Christadelphians will be deeply challenged by any kind of mass outreach into the world and bringing in those from the highways and byways into the community.

The Twenty First Century

With the growing ability to publish afforded by the internet and desktop publishing, Christadelphia began to fragment in the late 20th Century. Views contrary to some parts of the BASF were distributed widely, and there was a greater freedom of information and challenging of traditional positions. There developed a far greater distance between the liberal wing of Christadelphia and the conservative extreme. The two extremes would in some places hardly be recognizable as members of the same denomination. On the conservative end of the spectrum, dress code at meetings became paramount- women had to have heads covered at all meetings, men must wear ties and dark shoes and suits; the view was pushed that human nature is defiled to the point that Christ died to atone for it, and that He Himself suffered God's anger because of His nature. The Holy Spirit was seen as only active through the Bible; the Jewish people

Dress code at meetings is paramount- women must have heads covered at all church meetings, men must wear ties and dark shoes and suits	No dress code; women wear head coverings at no church meetings [this was always the case in some Central fellowship ecclesias, but it became more widespread
Those who do not attend church or who marry non Christadelphians are disfellowshipped; membership closed to gay and lesbian persons.	No disfellowship for any reason; growth of the online Gay Christadelphian movement through websites etc.; toleration of homosexuality
Women cannot give talks or sermons	Women seen as equal, speaking at Bible Schools and the breaking of bread meeting
The Holy Spirit works only through the Bible	Belief in the Holy Spirit gift of healing; gift of tongues claimed in a few ecclesias; more widespread view that the Holy Spirit works in human hearts directly from God
Human nature is defiled to the point that Christ died to atone for it, and that He Himself suffered God's anger because of His nature	Nothing is wrong with human nature, it is sin which separates from God; no metaphysical change occurred when Adam sinned
Only Christadelphians will be saved; Christadelphia is the body of Christ	All Christians are part of Christ's body and should be fellowshipped with
Cigarette smoking and alcohol not allowed	Allowed at Bible Schools although not encouraged
Wrong theological ideas will exclude people from salvation and fellowship with God now	Theology or "doctrine" is not so important

As Christadelphia saw departure from their original positions published openly on the internet, there was an inevitable reaction. Local ecclesias raised barriers against other ecclesias and individuals who thought differently, Christadelphian organizations launched attacks upon others, magazines endlessly criticized 'worrying trends' in their editorials. Refusing to provide reasons or enter into correspondence about their policy, *The Christadelphian* magazine started to refuse to publish news from some ecclesias, and declined to publish anything referring to certain families or organizations whom they disliked.

As Christadelphia grew rapidly in non-English speaking areas, the majority of those bearing the name Christadelphian were no longer English speakers by the early 2000s. They had no translation of the BASF in their languages, many were illiterate, and the BASF became increasingly irrelevant as a definition of Christadelphia. The tensions within Christadelphia became especially apparent in the non-English speaking world as a result of the tension between the Christadelphian Bible Mission [CBM] and those associated with the Christadelphian Advancement Trust or Carelinks Christadelphian Ministries, an organization started by the Heaster family after their departure from the CBM in the early 2002. According to a position published in *The Christadelphian* magazine in 2004, no baptism performed by Carelinks, Christadelphian Advancement Trust [CAT] or related groups since 2004 was to be accepted as valid. A mud campaign was run against these organizations, with advice by the CBM not to financially support any mission work apart from their own, and an attempt to rebaptize those baptized by Carelinks. Offers of money and "welfare" were made by CBM to get converts onside with them, and there was a discouragement or disallowal of those baptized by Carelinks to break bread and a refusal to work with those who work with Carelinks. The CAT and CCM used *Bible Basics* as their main preaching medium, a book by Duncan Heaster which is widely used throughout Christadelphia for teaching basic doctrine. Although the book was at one stage published by the CBM, they reclassified *Bible Basics* as heretical, although the text remained unchanged. The CBM and CCMPA refused to dialogue on any level with Carelinks or CAT about their positions. The CAT / Carelinks groups, along with other non-CBM mission organizations in Africa, were baptizing hundreds of people worldwide each year, far more than the CBM, and over the years the situation developed whereby many bearing the name Christadelphian had no contact with the CBM and were unaware of the BASF document and the claims to power over all Christadelphia made by the CBM and CCMPA. CCM, CAT and the mission groups not aligned with CBM continue to be open to breaking of bread and fellowship with CBM.

This is the current position within Christadelphia. The confused situation is daunting and hard for many new converts to understand- so much so that some ecclesias in the Western world and even in the mission field no longer advertise themselves as "Christadelphian" but use terms such as "Bible Center" or "Community Church".

2 Until the fall of Communism

The takeover of Eastern Europe by the Soviet bloc meant that it was hard to practice Protestant religion on an organized level. Whilst theoretically the Orthodox and Catholic churches were allowed to operate, there was no opportunity for education or career advancement unless people were visible supporters of the Communist party. Unregistered meetings were not allowed, and religious registration was not given. Possession of the Bible was outlawed in some places at some times during the Communist era. Protestant leaders were arrested and sent to correction camps or were otherwise liquidated. There was a conscious attempt to infiltrate Protestant groups and thus arrest the leaders. Biblical literature was very difficult to obtain and whilst a few Western organizations tried to smuggle Bibles into Eastern Europe, for the most part they were unavailable.

Throughout the Communist era, there was no formal Christadelphian activity in Eastern Europe until the 1980s. There were of course individuals within the region who studied the Bible for themselves, and several came to similar or identical conclusions to the Christadelphians, connecting with them in the late 1980s and early 1990s. However there were no groups that are known to us who believed as Christadelphians did, and there was no formal attempt to bring Christadelphian literature into Eastern Europe. Some Christadelphian individuals, notably Alan Hayward, Marcus Heaster and Alan Eyre, had contact with the underground churches and groups in Eastern Europe, and Alan Hayward's book *God Is* was translated into Russian and illegally distributed.

Alan Eyre has made the claim that there was a large group of Christadelphians in the Ukraine in the 1920s who were in touch with the Christadelphians in Birmingham, but who then perished during Stalin's purges. He has likewise claimed that the *Polish Brethren* of the 17th and 18th centuries believed as Christadelphians do, and remnants of those groups continued to believe as Christadelphians do throughout the 20th century. However, these claims are unfounded. The group in Ukraine were a breakaway from the Jehovah's Witnesses and still maintained Jehovah's Witness doctrines in some areas; they never self-identified as Christadelphians. Ruth McHaffie published detailed critiques of Alan Eyre's research regarding the Polish Brethren, demonstrating without doubt that whilst some of them were non-Trinitarians, they held many doctrines which are rejected by the Christadelphians. When the theological ancestors of the Polish Brethren were contacted and met with in Poland and the former Czechoslovakia in the early 1990s, they made it clear that they did not share, and never had shared, Christadelphian beliefs.

3 Early Beginnings 1988 - 1997

3.1 Esperanto

The first organized Christadelphian outreach into Eastern Europe began with a dedicated group of Christadelphians worldwide learning Esperanto and producing and distributing literature through the channels of Esperanto clubs. Jean Field, Ernest Batey, June Churchill and David Budden were active in this work in Eastern Europe, holding stands at the Esperanto congresses in Cuba and Warsaw in the 1980s. As a result of this work, contact was made with a number of individuals who were then baptized in the early 1990s- including Viktor Sluczewski and Nina Zuyeva from Russia, brothers in Romania and sisters in Poland. This work was under the aegis of the Christadelphian Bible Mission in the UK and they followed up on these contacts with the liberalization of the religious situation in Eastern Europe from the late 1980s.

3.2 The Dawn Christadelphians

The Christadelphians, as noted in section 1, are divided into many exclusive groups and “fellowships”, one of which was the Dawn fellowship based in London, UK. At that time the Christadelphian Advancement Trust and those who would later found Carelinks Christadelphian Ministries were members of the Dawn fellowship. They began distributing English literature and later *Bible Basics* in Eastern Europe from the late 1980s. The first actual missionary visit by them was made by Lisle Bowen, Duncan Heaster and Nathan and Rose Toms to what was then East Germany and Poland in 1990, obtaining some of the last ever East German visas issued, followed up that same year by a visit to Moscow by Andy Griffiths, Duncan Heaster and Andrew Perry, distributing literature in English and Russian on the street in Moscow and placing advertisements in major Soviet newspapers such as *Pravda* and *Moskovsij Komsomolets*. Response was huge- in the thousands- and the first public lecture was held in the Kosmos Hotel, Moscow by Andy Griffiths, Duncan Heaster and Michael Guest. The USSR broke up in 1991, with Lithuania being the first republic to break away. Duncan Heaster and Jeremy Skinner drove into Lithuania and Latvia at that time and distributed tens of thousands of leaflets advertising Bible literature in English. Large crowds gathered around to receive the leaflets and some large street meetings were held on the streets of Kaunas and other Lithuanian cities. Despite some Police opposition, the authorities were unsure of their rights to forcibly stop the meetings. There was a triple attraction- meeting genuine Western people, the English language, and access to what had previously been forbidden, i.e. the Bible and Protestant Christianity. About 1 in 10 leaflets distributed were posted back to England by inquisitive people eager for Bible literature. There were other major distributions of leaflets throughout Poland, the former Czechoslovakia and then later into Hungary, Bulgaria and the former Yugoslavia. Advertising continued in the main Russian newspapers, and by 1992 there was a database of literally thousands of serious contacts throughout Eastern Europe.

Duncan Heaster moved to Lithuania in 1991 and spent the rest of his life until the present travelling around Eastern Europe and the former USSR visiting and baptizing contacts and ministering to those who had been baptized. Baptisms occurred all over Eastern Europe in the early 1990s, with the first Bible School being held near Vilnius, Lithuania in 1992. Martin Webster and his family came over from Canada to minister at the School.

3.2.1 In the Former USSR

Early baptisms were especially numerous in Lithuania and Latvia and an ecclesia was formed in Vilnius. Nik Gorlovsky was very active in the work at that time, along with the Skripskus family. Literature was produced, with *Bible Basics* being translated into Russian by the late brother Vladimir Tuyev of Riga, Latvia. Mark Greeves moved from the UK to Latvia and Stephan Collishaw to Vilnius, Lithuania to assist with the work.

Lithuanian brethren travelled to Belarus and Ukraine to baptize contacts there, and there were baptisms throughout Russia, with Igor Sipiagov of Moscow doing great work with translation and logistical assistance to the work, and Vladislav Monastyrkov of Tambov, Alexei Hodusov of Krasnodarskij Kraj and Slava Savchenko of Tomsk founding ecclesias in those areas.

Stas Avramenko was the first convert in Kazakhstan, and there were also baptisms in Armenia, Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova and Uzbekistan. The CAT magazine *Gospel News* was produced in Russian with the title translated into Russian as *Dobrye Vesti*. It was edited initially by Duncan Heaster, who then requested first Nik Gorlovsky and then Dmitry Krasavin to edit it, with CAT in the UK as the publisher.

3.2.2 In the Rest of Eastern Europe

In other parts of Eastern Europe, the Dawn / Heaster group were active mainly in Poland, founding ecclesias in Wadowice and Warsaw, but despite major press advertising and leaflet distribution efforts in Hungary, Bulgaria, Romania, Serbia and the former Czechoslovakia, they baptized only a few individuals in those areas and no ecclesias developed.

3.3 The Christadelphian Bible Mission

The CBM began their work in Eastern Europe after the collapse of the Communist regimes by following up on the few converts they had made from work in Esperanto, and by leaflet distribution campaigns, particularly in Estonia, Czech, Romania and Bulgaria. They succeeded in establishing strong ecclesias in Romania and Bulgaria but baptized only a few individuals in other areas. They made particular progress at the Esperanto club in Yelets, Russia.

The CBM opened a separate committee for Eastern Europe, with a system of “Linkmen” for the countries they were operating in. The Central fellowship of Christadelphians [one of the various groups mentioned in chapter 1] take up collections for missionary work, and the money is divided up between the various committees and sub-committees of the CBM, who choose individuals to make visits who fit their criteria and who uphold their policies on various issues [e.g. divorce, the role of women in the church etc.]. The visitors generally have their trips paid for and must report back to the CBM after the trip. The Dawn / CAT work was far less structured, with interested individuals making trips often at their own cost and initiative, privately fundraising by networking with sympathetic individuals, usually appealing for funds towards the achievement of specific objectives such as funding a Bible School or publishing a particular book. The CBM and the Dawn / Heaster group preach identical doctrines. The CBM had access to a far wider range of literature and tended to translate small booklets into local languages, whilst encouraging people to study their correspondence course in Esperanto or English. The Dawn group worked almost exclusively with Duncan Heaster’s *Bible Basics* system, based around 12 brief lessons published as *Introducing Bible*

Basics and the larger book *Bible Basics*, a 380 page study of the basic doctrines believed by Christadelphians. These works were translated into Polish, Russian and Lithuanian early on in their work in Eastern Europe, and are now in over 60 languages. The doctrinal content of the CBM and Dawn approach was identical, as recognized by the fact the CBM later published *Bible Basics* themselves with no doctrinal amendments.

4. Unity and Division 1996-1997

By 1996, there were around 400 Dawn Christadelphian members and maybe 30 CBM members in Eastern Europe. Both groups were preaching the same distinctive Christadelphian doctrines and yet the Dawn group were forbidden from fellowshipping with the CBM group. The main Dawn issues were their intolerance of remarriage after divorce, and their theory of "guilt by association", whereby any who fellowship any who fellowship with someone who is divorced and remarried must be disfellowshipped- along with any who refuse to disfellowship them. Starting from the late 1980s, there was a major move in Africa to reunite the Dawn and CBM groups. The situation in Africa was the same, although in many African countries there were far more CBM members than Dawn members. Unity was largely achieved in Zambia and Zimbabwe, where Duncan Heaster had lived and preached for some years, and the British Dawn brethren who were active there were disfellowshipped from the Dawn fellowship and joined the Central fellowship. Some members remained loyal to the Dawn group and continue preaching and baptizing to this day. This spirit of unity extended to Eastern Europe. The Dawn leadership in the UK refused to consider unity and so the CBM held meetings with individual Dawn missionaries. The price for unity was high- any Dawn member who fellowshiped with CBM was disfellowshipped and their family and friends were also unless they cut off that member from fellowship. Families and friendships divided. The CBM were later to use the same methods against Carelinks, with the same results.

Duncan Heaster broke bread with CBM members and was disfellowshipped for this by Dawn in 1996, with his family being disfellowshipped in 1997 for refusing to disfellowship him. A meeting was held between CBM and Duncan Heaster in Bath, UK, chaired by Roy Waddoup who was then the CBM Secretary for Europe, at which it was agreed to accept him and all he had baptized in Eastern Europe into the Central fellowship. This was confirmed by a meeting between the leading brethren of Latvia and Lithuania with the CBM in Tartu, Estonia in 1997, after which they all broke bread together.

The Dawn leadership in the UK reacted with unexpected aggression, pressurizing Dawn members in Eastern Europe to return to their exclusive fold and break fellowship with those who were breaking bread with the CBM. Circulars containing untrue accusations were translated into local languages and circulated throughout the former Dawn community in Eastern Europe. About 15 individuals, mainly in Poland and Russia, were persuaded to remain in the Dawn fellowship. The ecclesia in Tomsk, Russia split as a result of Slava Savchenko remaining with Dawn; the ecclesia in Tambov returned to Dawn fellowship in their entirety. The community in Poland likewise split. The Dawn community in Poland appears the most active, and they continue functioning to this day as a separate and exclusive Christadelphian community. They are quite active in preaching online in Poland, and have produced considerable literature in Polish. At the time of these events in 1997, most of them were ignorant of the actual issues and simply preferred to remain with the brethren from England who had visited them.

These events were not without precedent in Christadelphian history. The reunion between the “Suffolk Street” and Central fellowship in the 1950s likewise produced division and subdivision, and the formation of the exclusive “Old Paths” fellowship, comprised of those who disagreed with the reunion. And there were other examples of this basic sociological tendency- to leave a community because that community has united with another community.

5. Growth and Expansion 1997 – 2002

The CBM operation in Eastern Europe was relatively small in 1997, and the influx of so many new countries and members there took them some time to deal with. The pastoral work was based around two large Bible Schools in Winter and Summer, to which all members in the former USSR were invited. These were costly to run, and from 1997-1999 Duncan Heaster invited the Lampstand group in Australia to assist with running them, which they did. This group of brethren were nominally part of the Central fellowship but had formerly been associated with the “Logos” movement and were on the conservative wing of Christadelphia. They held dogmatic positions about Bible prophecy and the role of Russia and Eastern Europe as being opposed to Christ, and they propounded very conservative views about practical matters especially in relation to dress code. By 1999 they realized that the bulk of Christadelphians in Eastern Europe were not of one mind with them, and gradually ceased their involvement. There was however no animosity and the differences of perspective were generally handled in a Christian spirit. As their involvement faded out, the CBM organization became more involved, with Duncan and Marcus Heaster both sitting on the CBM committees in the UK.

1997-2002 was generally a positive time for the Christadelphian community in Eastern Europe. Ludmila Kuritsyna was converted in Kazakhstan and Ludmila Chernyahovets in Ukraine, and these two women went on to become some of the most dynamic Christadelphian preachers of all time. Ludmila Kuritsyna converted over 300 people, mainly women, in the Russian community of northern Kazakhstan. Under pressure from Islam and the local Kazakh community, many Russians fled the area, leaving only the weak and elderly behind. It was this pressured community which received the Gospel with great eagerness. The same was true to a lesser extent in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan.

Under the Boris Yeltsin regime, it was still possible to place newspaper adverts in Russia, and this continued. There were baptisms throughout Russia and the Ukraine. There was a steady growth of the ecclesias in Latvia and Lithuania, with many baptisms in the Latgale region. The CBM continued their successful work in Bulgaria and Romania, and there was some growth in the former Yugoslavia. An ecclesia developed in Moldova and several ecclesias in Ukraine. Russian speakers in Israel were also baptized as a result of the emigration of a Lithuanian brother, Virgilijus Landa, to Haifa; by 2002 there had been over 60 baptisms of Russians in Israel. Duncan Heaster and his associates were active in preaching in the former Yugoslavia and Albania, recording many baptisms in Albania and others in all the former Yugoslav republics except Slovenia.

The Summer and Winter Bible Schools continued, reaching a peak attendance of 230 at the Summer Bible School in Moscow in 2002, with 22 baptisms there. These schools attracted Christadelphians from all over the world- the UK, Australia, New Zealand, Canada and the USA. One notable feature was the involvement of Unammended fellowship brethren from North America. This fellowship was

and is generally not accepted in fellowship by the CBM / Central fellowship, who follow the Birmingham *Ammended* Statement of Faith. However, their members were welcomed in table fellowship at the Eastern European Bible Schools.

6. Further Division 2002-2004

Whilst everything looked quite positive at the 2002 Moscow Bible School, with 230 in attendance from most republics of the former USSR and 22 baptisms, it is now clear in hindsight that the seeds of division were already sown. Any division between persons, especially members of the same denomination, is multi-factorial. But it is a simple truth that jealousies and personalities are the main cause of such divisions, and historical hindsight can easily discern these issues at work in what happened to the Eastern European Christadelphians in the period 2002-2004.

The majority of Eastern European Christadelphians had been baptized by Duncan Heaster and had learned the Christadelphian faith through his book *Bible Basics*, a situation which is the case to this day. He had also been active in beginning the Christadelphian movement in Moslem areas, especially Iran, Pakistan and Afghanistan. These were new frontiers to Christadelphia, and the torture and murder of new converts and the risks associated with the mission work there put Heaster even more into the limelight of a generally very inward looking and insular Christadelphian community in the West. He was also speaking at Western Christadelphian functions worldwide. There was inevitably a sense of jealousy and suspicion that the many new converts flooding into the Christadelphian community were not of the same standard as their Western counterparts. The opening up of country after country to the Christadelphian faith, with converts entering the community with a wide range of pastoral and material problems not previously encountered in Christadelphia, led to a distinct unease with Heaster and his group. The Heasters edited a magazine, *Gospel News*, which is devoted to news and views from those baptized in the mission field. By 2002, with a circulation of 6000 copies, this had become one of the largest magazines in Christadelphia, and was seen as a threat by the CMPA and CBM, who considered that their magazines, *The Christadelphian* and *The Bible Missionary* were the official mouthpieces of Christadelphia.

Things came to a head in Summer 2002 when the CBM presented Duncan & Cindy Heaster with a list of allegations which they considered him guilty of. The list of allegations were partly doctrinal- a concern that he maybe was Trinitarian, due to some comments in his book *Beyond Bible Basics*, and that he baptized people too quickly- and partly concerned with style:

- a disagreement with his prayer request network called Carelinks
- a concern at paying money for the release of brethren who had been handed the death penalty in Iran, concerns about helping brethren flee Iran and Afghanistan seeking asylum
- disagreement with his association with Alan Eyre, an active Christadelphian missionary who had fallen out with the CBM
- intolerance of him raising funds to meet welfare needs which the CBM refused to meet, e.g. antiretroviral drugs for brethren with HIV and AIDS

- a demand that he ceased fellowshiping with the Unammended Christadelphians in America, whom CBM held to be “out of fellowship”
- disagreement with the way that he allowed and encouraged those he had baptized to teach and baptize others, especially if they were women, and a demand that sisters he had baptized desist from baptizing and running breaking of bread meetings
- a demand that he disfellowshipped those who accepted alternative military service which they performed wearing military uniform.

The Heasters were handed these accusations in writing at the end of a CBM Committee meeting but were given no opportunity to respond. Cindy Heaster was asked to leave the meeting because she was a sister. The Heasters repeatedly asked for meetings with the CBM to discuss the accusations. They strongly denied the doctrinal allegations and insisted that *Bible Basics* remained their position on all doctrinal matters. They offered alternative explanations and corrected what they considered to be misinformation in some of the practical issues. The CBM declined to meet with them to discuss the issues and made no formal response to their written explanations. Duncan Heaster was removed from the CBM in 2002, and Cindy Heaster received a letter from the CBM saying that they did not have any need for sisters in their work and therefore she should consider herself outside of the CBM. The Heasters and their supporters wrote many letters to the CBM over the period 2002-2012 asking for meetings to discuss the issues with a view to reconciliation. These letters were either not responded to or a meeting was declined. There has never to this date been any meeting between CBM and the Heasters nor Carelinks to discuss the issues.

The CBM proceeded to pressurize their workers to not fellowship or work with the Heasters, resulting in a number of long term CBM workers being marginalized or forced out of the organization. The Carelinks prayer network was initially an email list mentioning needs requiring prayer in the mission work Heaster was associated with. Those supportive of Carelinks, along with the Heasters and those forced out of the CBM, appealed to the wider Christadelphian world for support and continued preaching and publishing *Bible Basics*. Marcus Heaster was visited by the CBM and presented with an ultimatum: To stop breaking bread with his son Duncan and cease any support of the work of publishing and distributing *Bible Basics*, or, to be removed from the CBM. When he refused, he was excluded from the CBM with immediate effect. Other similar visits were made by CBM leaders to individuals, who were presented with the same ultimatum.

The excluded group, and those who disagreed with the CBM’s approach, formed a loose-knit group called Carelinks Christadelphian Ministries- comprised of Carelinks Australia, Carelinks Canada, Carelinks New Zealand, Carelinks South Africa, Carelinks UK and Carelinks USA. The CBM response was ferocious. Whilst upholding a policy of not meeting with Carelinks nor the Heasters personally, they began a campaign of misinformation and vague allegation against Carelinks. The Australian CBM wrote to Cindy Heaster asking her to leave her husband as he was in their view apostate, and the wider families of both Cindy and Duncan Heaster divided bitterly over the issue, with some relatives insisting they not be fellowshiped, and others arguing strongly that they should be. The Carelinks group wrote circulars in their defence but after 2004 changed their policy to focus their energy solely upon preaching and pastoral care rather than self defence.

The CBM urged those baptized in Eastern Europe and other mission fields to not fellowship with the Heasters and not to use *Bible Basics*. Welfare and other material inducement was given to those who agreed with the CBM stance. In parts of Africa, African converts were told to burn or destroy literature produced by Carelinks, and during the famine in Malawi, staple food welfare was denied to those who had written in *Gospel News* magazine. Attempts were made to rebaptize those baptized by the Carelinks group. In parts of the USA, those who fellowshipped with the Carelinks brethren who had baptized them were then denied fellowship unless they gave written assurance that they would no longer break bread with the Carelinks USA brethren who had baptized them. A widespread online campaign of defamation was run against Carelinks by CBM sympathizers. The allegations were always vague aspersions, often bizarre and self-evidently untrue, and were expressed with such vitriol that many uninvolved with the controversy came to side with Carelinks—despite the Carelinks leadership repeatedly stating that they did not want people to take sides, but to simply work together in spreading the Gospel. Petitions were signed by hundreds of Christadelphians, both in the West and in Eastern Europe, asking that the CBM cease the campaign and meet with Carelinks to resolve the issue. There was no response from the CBM, apart from to write to the Heasters and others banning them from attending any CBM gathering.

It should be noted that the CBM also had major issues with the other dynamic preachers within the Russian speaking world. We noted in chapter 1 the difficulty experienced by the Christadelphian leadership in relating with dynamic preachers. We have mentioned the dynamic work of Ludmila Kuritsyna, who baptized over 300 women in northern Kazakhstan. She was the target of much CBM criticism and allegation, apparently based around their difficulty in accepting a woman [as opposed to a man] so publically preaching and baptizing, and leading breaking of bread meetings. Kuritsyna made various personal allegations against the CBM visitors to Eastern Europe, which true or not did not endear her to them and set her up for being disfellowshipped. Kuritsyna herself was a traditionalist and upheld the principle of male leadership in ecclesias. She was sidelined by CBM, although supported by Carelinks, and died in great depression over the situation. Ludmila Chernyahovets of Ukraine was another dynamic preacher, who converted over 30 people in the town she lived in. Chernyahovets argued for full female participation in church leadership and was herself an impressive leader. The situation was felt to be serious enough for the editor of *The Christadelphian* magazine to visit her in Ukraine to rebuke her. When she spoke out against the CBM and accused them of slandering the Heasters, she was likewise sidelined by them. Cindy Heaster, wife of Duncan Heaster, was likewise an impressive preacher. Her letter of expulsion from the CBM gave as a reason that women were not required in CBM work.

The CBM position on women's participation was extreme even by Christadelphian standards. They published an article in their Russian language magazine claiming that those who were baptized by women were likely not going to be in the Kingdom of God, and the sisters who baptized others were likely to be rejected at the day of judgment because of what they were doing. This position only deepened the sense that the CBM in Eastern Europe were extreme. In that position we can see the beginnings of the later CBM policy [to be discussed below] that the validity of baptism depended upon the person performing it. This was a departure from the traditional Christadelphian position that people were able to be accepted as members "baptized by whomsoever".

It was not only women preachers who were targeted. Alexei Hodusov, one of the earliest Christadelphians in Russia, was a dynamic preacher who founded two large ecclesias. He was a

mature Bible student before meeting Christadelphians, and baptized people himself, with the encouragement of Carelinks. The CBM had a major problem with this, again reflecting a tendency towards their later policy that only baptisms performed under their hands were to be considered as valid.

The Effect in Eastern Europe

The CBM operations in Romania and Bulgaria were largely unaffected by the controversy because the Heaster group had not had much interaction with them. The CBM began to finance some English speaking local members, on the condition they upheld the CBM position against fellowshipping Carelinks, but this produced a strong counter reaction. *Gospel News* magazine was published in Russian as *Dobrie Vesti* ["Good News"] under the editorship of Dmitry Krasavin. Krasavin chose to support the CBM, and the Heasters' name and publishing details were removed from the magazine, which CBM now funded. There was quite some upset at the time in the Russian speaking Christadelphian world- that the CBM could produce a magazine founded and formerly published by the Heasters, but pushing an anti-Carelinks policy. The Heasters chose not to take legal issue over this, and instead produced a new magazine, *Utrenyaya Zvezda*, initially under the editorship of Valerij & Ludmila Chernyahovets of Polatava, Ukraine, and then under the editorship of Andrej Boldetsov of Rostov, Russia. In all Carelinks publications and magazines there was generally an avoidance of mentioning the issues with CBM in an attempt to encourage unity and positive thinking amongst the Christadelphian brotherhood.

Since the rift in 2002, the CBM did not succeed in making many if any fresh local converts in the Russian speaking world. The few they baptized were mainly relatives or contacts of those baptized by Carelinks. There was a notable swing to the right in CBM policy. Only some Christadelphians were allowed to attend CBM Bible Schools; interviews before baptism became very demanding; the CBM sponsored Russian language forum was full of accusations against the Heasters personally and Carelinks generally, and anyone who wrote in their defence was removed from the forum. Any contacts who were in touch with both the CBM and Carelinks were urged by CBM not to allow Carelinks to baptize them. Attendance at CBM Bible Schools was governed by long lists of demanding rules and requirements, any lack of attendance at a lecture or even the smell of tobacco smoke on a brother or sister meant that CBM financial sponsorship of their presence at the gathering would be withdrawn. The CBM withdrew fellowship from some whom the majority of Eastern European Christadelphians continued to fellowship, and a circular was sent around claiming that remarriage after divorce for any reason was not tolerable. Some of the CBM teams were themselves divorced and remarried since their baptisms, and this policy in particular made the CBM unpopular amongst many. The CBM published an article claiming that any baptisms performed by a woman were probably invalid before God and that the sisters performing the baptisms were doing something which could likely bring condemnation upon them at Christ's return. Seeing there were some very active female preachers and some largely female ecclesias in the Carelinks mission work, this article further alienated the CBM from the active preachers in the Russian brotherhood.

A Hardening of Positions

In 2004, the CBM published a strongly worded policy against Carelinks and other missionary organizations not aligned with them. They urged Christadelphians not to give any support to these organizations, and stated that they would not accept as valid any baptized by Carelinks or other

organizations. This was published in *The Christadelphian* magazine and a letter sent by them to every Christadelphian ecclesia in the Western world. There was protest against it throughout the Western world, as historically Christadelphians had accepted baptism as valid “by whomsoever”, and had never previously made the validity of baptism depend upon the baptizer having endorsement from the CBM.

This new position sealed the division, but in a messy way. The vast majority of Russian speaking Christadelphians had been baptized by Duncan Heaster. If they had been baptized prior to 2004, their baptism was accepted as valid; if afterwards, then it was not. Those baptized after 2004 were pressured by CBM to be rebaptized. And yet if they attended CBM functions they were often given the communion bread and wine, making the CBM position appear inconsistent. Likewise, Duncan Heaster continued to attend and break bread at Western Christadelphian gatherings where CBM workers were present and also breaking bread. The evident inconsistency, coupled with the careful refusal of the CBM to answer criticism and to dialogue meant that there was increasing support for Carelinks amongst those in the West who had previously been disinvolved onlookers.

In May 2004, the CBM pressured a small ecclesia in London UK to disfellowship Duncan Heaster. The ecclesia itself were divided and far less than the number required by their constitution voted for the disfellowship- around 10 people. The disfellowship meeting was presided over by Tecwyn Morgan of the CMPA and CBM- who was not a member of the ecclesia. The four reasons given for the disfellowship were:

- An abrasive attitude
- A sociopathic desire to divide the Christadelphian community
- Disobedience to elders
- False witness.

Heaster was present at the meeting and asked for evidence for each category but was not given anything; he pleaded innocent to all times, whilst apologizing for wherein he had appeared abrasive. Some members of the ecclesia protested and broke bread with Heaster the next Sunday, and they were then pressured to leave the ecclesia, which they did. Many Christadelphian ecclesias do not practice disfellowship at all, and those who do would consider the four reasons as not suitable grounds for disfellowship. Walton, a local ecclesia in the Central fellowship, looked into the case and after considering the allegations considered Heaster basically innocent and accepted him as a member of their ecclesia later in 2004. The principle of ecclesial autonomy practiced within the Central fellowship meant they were free to do this. The two ecclesias held a meeting at which no agreement was reached. The Western community of Christadelphians who were aware of the situation were divided between those who accepted Heaster as in fellowship and those who did not. That 10 misinformed people who hardly knew Duncan Heaster could disfellowship him when he clearly did not live in the UK and had not done most of his life was felt to be suspicious by many.

The relevance of this situation to Eastern Europe was that Duncan Heaster had not lived in the UK for many years and held membership at the ecclesia in Vilnius, Lithuania, from whence he had moved to the ecclesia in Riga, Latvia in 2003. These ecclesias were not consulted, and from 2004 they and all ecclesias in Latvia and Lithuania were removed without explanation or dialogue from the CALS diary, used as a touchstone of fellowship by the more conservative Christadelphian elements in the UK. *The Christadelphian* magazine had previously published their news in their

magazine, but they ceased doing so. There was never any discussion with the Latvian and Lithuanian ecclesias- numbering now over 1000 members, which made them by far the largest group of Christadelphians in mainland Europe. This kind of block disfellowship of 1000 members was not accepted by many in the Central fellowship. Worldwide visitors from over 40 different ecclesias have visited and broken bread with the Latvian and Lithuanian ecclesias since 2004. Duncan & Cindy Heaster themselves enjoy reasonable freedom of movement within the Christadelphian world, mainly in the more liberal ecclesias.

Individuals and groups have periodically tried to pressure the CBM and CMPA to reconsider their position, but the policy of “no dialogue” means that the situation continues. The majority of Christadelphians worldwide are either unaware of the problem, or are tired of such politics. The Carelinks-CBM problem was seen by many as being yet another of the many petty conflicts which increasingly characterize Christadelphia. Many Christadelphians now simply believe in supporting positive Gospel outreach and proactive care for those in need. This being the platform of Carelinks, they have continued to get support for their work whilst the CBM and CMPA appear to be in decline. Their decline was accelerated by internal problems and serious scandals involving some of their leading members, who having been instrumental in leading the campaign against Carelinks were then disfellowshipped or left Christadelphia in disgrace.

The CBM continued to pressure people to be rebaptized, and succeeded in a much publicized case in Thailand. They reported this rebaptism in their *Bible Missionary* magazine as the first ever Christadelphian baptism in Thailand, despite being fully aware of Carelinks visits to Thailand over the years and performing of baptisms there. Their view was that those baptized by Carelinks simply did not exist. Likewise the CBM Welfare Secretary claimed there were no Christadelphians in need in Eastern Europe- in response to Carelinks appeals for Winter welfare support for those they had baptized. CBM’s view was that those Christadelphians simply did not exist as “Christadelphians”. However, CBM’s failure to make many or any fresh converts in the Russian speaking world left them in a strange position. They held Bible Schools and sent British CBM members throughout the former USSR, but nearly all the Christadelphians they met had either been taught or baptized by Carelinks. They continued breaking bread with these members and treating them as Christadelphians, whilst on the other hand claiming their baptisms as invalid if baptized post 2004, and urging them not to associate with Carelinks or use their literature or Bibles.

7 The Current Situation: Growth and Expansion 2008-2012

7.1 In the Former USSR

The divisions of 2002-2004 led to disillusion amongst many Russian speaking Christadelphians. Many left, whilst remaining sympathetic to the Carelinks group. By 2012, the hardcore CBM supporters in the Russian speaking world numbered less than 10, although several of these were in receipt of material support from CBM or their related organizations. If and when this was withdrawn, they tended to return to the Carelinks group. However, there was a gradual growth in Ukraine and Russia, which started to accelerate. And there was amazing growth in Latvia, as will be mentioned

specifically later. By 2012, the Carelinks group had baptized around 2000 Christadelphians in Eastern Europe since beginning their work in 1990. Baptisms performed by them increased in number after 2009, mainly due to the large numbers being baptized in Latvia. There had never before been so many baptisms in the history of Christadelphians in the Russian speaking world. The dynamism spreading from Latvia encouraged many throughout the former USSR, and new Russian speaking ecclesias were founded in several places, including Bishkek, Armavir and Donetsk.

Attendance at CBM Bible Schools began to wane, and increased financial support meant Carelinks resumed holding a Summer Bible School in Moscow. Attendance at Carelinks Bible Schools steadily increased, as did the baptisms at them. Increasingly people who had been discouraged by CBM rigidity and legalistic approaches chose to bring their relatives and contacts to Carelinks functions rather than the CBM ones. CBM continued to decry Carelinks online, discouraging the use of Bibles or literature published by Carelinks, and in one case forbidding a Russian family to have Duncan Heaster in their home.

Both the CBM and Carelinks had a strong online presence, especially in the Russian speaking world, where both claimed to be the official, mainline face of Christadelphia. The Carelinks group produced many resources which were popular amongst average Russian speaking Christadelphians- MP3s, videos, a study Bible with commentary, a wide range of major books etc. The CBM employed people to produce regular breaking of bread sermons in Russian and to be full time translators. Both groups produced a magazine, the CBM one being of higher production quality and translating articles by English speaking CBM brethren, whilst the Carelinks one featured news and articles solely from Russian speaking brethren. Most people who became interested in Christadelphian doctrine online soon come to realize that there are two groups, preaching the same doctrines but with the CBM group clearly aggressive and exclusive towards the other group. This often causes people to loose interest, especially if they find their personal marital position under examination by the CBM group, and realize they must be subjected to a lengthy pre-baptismal examination of their lives along with various practical demands upon them. The CBM policy of charging contacts money for attending their Bible Schools is also a discouragement to many from association with that group.

The Carelinks Bible with commentary has become the standard Bible used in the Russian speaking Christadelphian world and there would appear to be tens of thousands of copies of *Bible Basics* in circulation throughout the region- not only in Russian, but in most languages of the former USSR.

7.2 In the Rest of Eastern Europe

CBM growth in other parts of Eastern Europe has slowed recently, with very few new baptisms reported. Carelinks have reported several in Poland, and large numbers in Kosovo. The CBM continue to support their ecclesias in Bulgaria, Czech and Romania but there appear few new baptisms there. Total numbers of active Christadelphians of whatever persuasion in Eastern Europe excluding the former USSR would likely not be greater than 100.

7.3 The Special Case of the Baltic States

Carelinks had always reported many baptisms in Lithuania and Latvia, with Duncan Heaster having lived in the area since 1992 and his wife Cindy since 2002. During the period 1998-2003, Marcus Heaster was the CBM Linkman for the area. He was removed from this post and expelled from the

CBM after he refused the CBM demand to cease breaking bread with his son Duncan, and to cease distributing *Bible Basics*. CBM replaced him with Mark Greeves and made a brief attempt to attract Latvian Christadelphians to join the CBM. This failed, and the CBM disfellowshipped Mark Greeves after 3 years despite him being a hard worker for the Christadelphian cause. After this, CBM pulled out of claiming any association with Latvia and Lithuania. From that time, there was an extraordinary growth of Christadelphians in Latvia and in the capital, Riga, especially. The growth and dynamism in Riga was one of the most dramatic things seen in Christadelphian mission work at any time. The ecclesia became probably the largest Christadelphian ecclesia in the world, numbering several hundred members. Their Bible studies and meetings are conducted in Russian and broadcast throughout the Russian speaking brotherhood. There are regular visits from Christadelphians from all over the world, and widespread support of their various humanitarian outreach projects- housing projects, Winter welfare, feeding schemes, support for asylum seekers, mothers groups, children's church etc. Latvian Christadelphians meet various response when they travel in Western countries for work or emigration. Some ecclesias accept them, others don't, upholding the CBM-CMPA position that the ecclesias of Lithuania and Latvia are out of fellowship with them.

7.4 The Eastern European Diaspora

The hard economic situation in Eastern Europe led many to emigrate, taking their Christadelphian faith with them. There are Carelinks baptized Christadelphians in active membership of Western Christadelphian ecclesias all over the world. The largest area of baptisms of Russian speakers was in Israel. The Heaster group baptized around 100 Russian speakers there, but the ecclesias there were decimated by the CBM-Carelinks division. CBM assisted some Russian speaking members there with welfare and a meeting place, but on the condition that the Heasters were not allowed to attend the meetings. In 2004, the CBM published a statement in the *Christadelphian* magazine declaring the majority of those baptized in Israel as out of fellowship, referring to them as "men and women" rather than brothers and sisters, simply because they had declined to attend a meeting called by CBM near Tel Aviv to establish a CBM ecclesia. Those who attended and undertook not to fellowship with Duncan Heaster were declared to be the one and only ecclesia in Israel, and all the others (the majority of Christadelphians in Israel at the time) were declared out of fellowship and unwelcome in fellowship. Carelinks continued work in Israel, with a trickle of baptisms.

8 Future Prospects

In terms of sociology, psychology and the history of religion it will be interesting to see how Christadelphia develops in Eastern Europe. The will of the average Christadelphian in the Russian speaking world is without question to side with the Carelinks approach. But the CBM have large resources and seem determined to continue their program of regular visits to the area. Comparing CBM activity in Eastern Europe with their work in Africa and elsewhere, it is apparent that far more financial and human resources are expended by them in Eastern Europe than elsewhere. There is also without doubt a polarization in Western Christadelphia between the liberal, grace-focused wing, and the traditionalists who not only uphold the community's traditional approaches but do so with an increasing extremism. This of course is typical of establishments in decline. It remains to be seen whether they will persist, given the decreasing welcome they experience amongst the Christadelphians in Eastern Europe; and whether the result of the conflict of approaches will be the

‘destruction by disillusion’ of the denomination in the region. In the history of religious communities, especially Protestant groups like the Christadelphians, typically the phoenix that arises from the ashes of such conflicts is somewhat different in doctrine and practice from the original denomination. What is interesting in this case is that the Carelinks group do not hold any different doctrines to the CBM group, and the practical differences appear to be only cosmetic.

It also must be remembered that Eastern European Christadelphia is but a microcosm of the situation in the rest of the world. This study has shown that the history of the Christadelphians there has continued the contradictions and conflicts with which the denomination started in the 19th century. The decline of the power of the establishment is seen throughout the world on various levels. And it is seen in Western Christadelphia, with *The Christadelphian* magazine, the CMPA and CBM losing their powerbase, racked by internal problems, and unable to appear meaningful in the modern world. When establishments break up, dynamic smaller groups come to prominence and significance. This has been the case in Christadelphia worldwide, and it is the case in Eastern Europe at this time.

9 Relocating the Christadelphians

A Spiritual Perspective

This history of the Christadelphians in Eastern Europe has been presented here in secular, worldly-analysis terms. There is a distinct pattern in the history of the community which fits in clearly with the standard history-of-religions approach to the history of small Protestant groups: An initial period of growth and enthusiasm, followed by subdivision and inward looking attitudes, with occasional revivals by small groups in some areas at some times, followed by further division and subdivision, with the ‘establishment’ of the denomination becoming increasingly extreme and heavy handed in dealing with groups they seek to exclude. The congruence between Christadelphian history and the general pattern followed by small Protestant groups has been noted and exemplified by non-Christadelphian students of the community, notably Bryan Wilson in his book *Sects and Society*. The end point in the path of many Protestant denominations is that they either cease to exist, or they change their doctrinal basis compared to what they originally believed. Whether Christadelphia will move towards that end remains to be seen. What is remarkable is that there has not been a change in basic doctrinal positions so far.

From a spiritual perspective, the similarities between Christadelphian history and that of other denominations can be a cause for disillusion and cynicism, wondering if there is really anything special about the Christadelphians, or any Christian denomination for that matter. However, the Christadelphians in Eastern Europe are part of the body of Christ, and their path through history is therefore not without the presence of God and God’s will. Each individual, every ecclesia, every committee and mission organization, has the opportunity to work with God and follow His leading; to defy the precedents of secular history and be a radical exception to the rules of sociology and history. And there is no lack of evidence that many individual Christadelphians have succeeded in doing this. For in Christ, the old passes away and the individual and thereby the community of individuals are to be a “new creation” (2 Cor. 5:17). The essence is an individual’s personal relationship with Christ, and their real hope of resurrection to the life eternal at His return.

In that day, we will perceive all the players in the history we have considered as just situations we had to live with in order to prepare us for eternity. Christadelphia, CBM, Carelinks, Duncan Heaster, *Bible Basics*, dossiers, reports, accusations, defences and counter-accusations will then pass away. But the result of our individual response to them will last eternally. In that day, we shall understand that they were all necessary for us to pass through. This is not to say that decision making and right judgment are ultimately irrelevant. Not at all- these are the very things which are required to prepare us for acceptance by the Lord in the last day. Clearly God allowed the divided situation in Christadelphia to develop in order to be an environment in which we can learn the humility, personal skills and characteristics He seeks. But there is no doubt that division causes and has caused so many of God's people, those for whom Christ bled and died, to stumble out of the path which leads to eternal life. And this will be required at the last day. It seems inevitable that causes of offence and division will come- but woe to those men by whom they come (Mt. 18:7).

If Christadelphia would learn from their sad and bitter history, the need to not cause little ones to stumble would be written large, written in the blood of those who left the way, and to not cause others to stumble would be the first principle by which decision making was governed. If the Carelinks-CBM division were to be resolved, Christadelphia could really be at the cutting edge of Eastern European society, and the church would easily become a household name. CBM's undoubted resources of money and manpower achieves relatively little compared to what it could; the preaching success of Carelinks with far more slender resources, teaching the same doctrines, shows that interest is really there in Eastern Europe. There is an urgent need there for the doctrines taught by Christadelphia, and genuine interest in them- far more than in the Western world, who have had generations of easy access to the Gospel and now spurn it, for the most part. But the two groups need to work together- just as there needs to be genuine unity in other parts of the Christadelphian world. One of the saddest things about Biblical history is the sense of what might have been, and what was not- because of human short-sightedness, adherence to traditions, personality clashes and the like. These are the very things which can be overcome by a total surrender to the principles of the Lord Jesus Christ and His word of grace. Whether or not this can be achieved on a communal level is open to question. But we as individuals can and must learn the lessons and live them on a personal level, even with our backs to the world, as we await the return of the Lord of all grace and understanding who died for us.