

A History of the Christadelphian Faith in Malawi

Carelinks Publishing

PO Box 152, Menai NSW 2234 Australia

www.carelinks.net

The doctrines believed and taught by the Believers in Christ Malawi are identical to those taught by the Christadelphians. No other church or denomination in Malawi appears to teach anything similar. So far as is known, this unique set of teachings were first introduced to Malawi with the baptism of Richard Mysambosa, a tribal chief from Zomba, in the 1960s. He was baptized and initially mentored by a Christadelphian brother Ian Leask from South Africa. Mysambosa was active in spreading the Truth throughout Malawi, and became affiliated with the Christadelphian Bible Mission in the UK. Mysambosa organized the Christadelphians in Malawi in an 'African' way; each church had elders, who took tithes from the members; and the elders paid tithes upwards to regional elders, who paid tithes upwards to executive elders, with Mysambosa at the top. The Christadelphians spread rapidly throughout Malawi and neighbouring Mozambique. The distinctive Christadelphian rejection of the existence of a personal Satan and demons was not enforced, and the system of tithing and eldership was not that followed by Christadelphians elsewhere. During the Kamuzu Banda regime, churches were expected to be politically active and supportive of the regime and to participate when required in military service. Christadelphians generally do not vote, are not politically active and are conscientious objectors to army service. However the Christadelphian Bible Mission [CBM] allowed these different interpretations of Christadelphia by the Christadelphians in Malawi. The CBM however tried to limit access to Malawi. The incorrect claim was made until recently that there were hardly any English speaking Christadelphians in Malawi [despite English being the official language of Malawi]; there were no reports of the thousands of baptisms (although CBM reported baptisms in *The Christadelphian* magazine from most other areas of the world); and the British brethren who went to Malawi were only from the establishment. Christadelphian welfare organizations and other Christadelphians from South Africa were discouraged from involvement. The tithing practice meant that Christadelphia in Malawi became subject to the tendency of all tithing churches- to push for large numbers and more churches because this meant more tithes being paid into the pyramid system. That notwithstanding, the evangelical zeal and success of Richard Mysambosa was considerable.

Mysambosa was disfellowshipped by the Christadelphian Bible Mission over allegations of financial dishonesty, despite Mysambosa protesting his innocence. Mysambosa was a wealthy man in his own

right, and circumstantial and personal evidence suggest that the allegations were false, and the real issue was a personality clash and an intense dislike on the part of the British Christadelphian Bible Mission of a situation where the most successful evangelist within Christadelphia was a black African. Mysambosa perhaps demonstrated his integrity by going on to establish a new church with identical beliefs to the Christadelphians. He called them the Abale w Kristu, Chichewa for “brethren in Christ”, which is what the Greek term “Christadelphian” means. At the time of his disfellowship, several thousand had been baptized by Mysambosa’s churches in Malawi. From his disfellowship until the time of his death in 1980, Mysambosa’s Abale w Kristu group baptized several thousand more members, both in Malawi and Mozambique.

After Mysambosa’s death, the local CBM members in Malawi sought to get the Abale w Kristu to join with them. More numbers and more churches tithing to the regional elders meant more money in the system. However, over the years, the average person calling themselves a Christadelphian in Malawi was largely unaware of the detailed doctrinal positions held as fundamental by Christadelphia worldwide. There was very little Chichewa literature; few had Bibles, and the CBM insisted on selling Bibles to members rather than giving them.

Western Christadelphia is divided into various exclusive fellowships who will not fellowship with each other. In the late 1980s, Duncan and Marcus Heaster, then of the Dawn fellowship, began advertising Bible literature in Malawian newspapers and travelling to Malawi to baptize individual who had completed the *Bible Basics* course. Over the next 25 years they baptized large numbers of people with their own hands and prepared many others for baptism. Heaster’s book *Bible Basics* was then translated into Chichewa and became the main teaching manual used by Christadelphians in Malawi. A number of English speaking Malawian CBM members were attracted to the Dawn fellowship because they felt that there was more attention to doctrine there and that the doctrines taught in *Bible Basics* were actually believed by them, whereas many CBM Christadelphians in Malawi believed standard church doctrine.

The Heasters discouraged this situation, believing in the unity of the body of Christ. Their position was to encourage unity between the Dawn and CBM groups in Malawi, even though it was undeniable that many in the CBM group did not share full Christadelphian doctrine or practice. In 1997, Duncan Heaster and Fred Milburn, on behalf of the CBM, held a summit in Lilongwe to try to resolve the issue, with representatives from all groups present at a well attended conference. Most of the Dawn group agreed to join with the rest of the Christadelphians in Malawi, but some did not—and therefore the Dawn fellowship, along with a few other minority groups, are still active in Malawi to this day. The Dawn fellowship disfellowshipped the Heasters for advocating unity with the CBM and they worked with the CBM.

In 2002, the CBM declared Duncan Heaster’s book *Bible Basics* to be heretical [despite having themselves published and used it in their work] and made a number of vague accusations against the Heasters and their co-workers [later known as Carelinks] which they denied. The CBM refused at the time to meet with the Heasters to discuss the issues and have never once met with them to discuss them. They removed the Heasters and a number of other mission workers from their organization. It is widely accepted that the CBM actions against the Heasters were poorly motivated, badly executed and based upon personality issues rather than any difference in doctrine. Like Richard Mysambosa before them, the Heasters continued preaching Christadelphian doctrine.

In 2004, the CBM published a position statement in *The Christadelphian* magazine stating that they would not accept the baptisms performed by Carelinks, the Heasters or any other mission organization apart from themselves. The CBM visitors to Malawi told local brethren to destroy copies of *Bible Basics* or the Carelinks magazine *Gospel News*. During famine, CBM welfare [e.g. maize sacks] was not given to those whose names appeared as contributors in *Gospel News* magazine. The situation became even more difficult because since 2004, CBM membership in Malawi and Mozambique [according to their own statistics published in the CBM Guidebook] increased by a few thousand / year. Welfare support was given to elders on the basis of how many members they had beneath them, the tithing system continued, and the desire for more members was great. There are now over 15,000 people calling themselves Christadelphian Bible Mission in Malawi and Mozambique- almost as many Christadelphian as there are in the Western world. These figures require the average baptism of many people every day, 365 days / year. The rise in numbers was associated with many of the new members not understanding Christadelphian teachings. Those who were baptized after studying *Bible Basics* found themselves attending CBM ecclesias whose members believed standard Christian positions on matters of basic doctrine such as the nature of God, Jesus, Satan and the Kingdom of God. And yet they were told by the British visitors to destroy their copies of *Bible Basics*, and latterly to destroy even the NEV Bibles given them from Carelinks because they contained a version of *Bible Basics* at the back of them.

Carelinks Ministries, the organization founded by Duncan Heaster after his departure from the CBM in 2002, sent out welfare to those Christadelphians in Malawi who were not assisted by the CBM, and sought to network individuals worldwide to mail out Bibles and welfare parcels. Those individuals were sought out by CBM and pressurized to desist, even though they refused to provide assistance to those Christadelphians whom Carelinks were seeking to assist.

The situation was not happy in Malawi. But God had plans to deal with this and to give the brotherhood a chance of a better way. He worked in a wonderful way. Esau Chirwa was a Malawian from Nkhotakota who spent some months training in fish farming on an island off the coast of Norway. With constant internet access there, he set about finding God's Truth on doctrinal matters. He studied *Bible Basics* online, and then Duncan Heaster visited and baptized him in Norway. Esau vowed to return to his native Malawi and spread the Truth to his church there. This he did. His pastor, Leonard Chaunga, learnt the Truth from *Bible Basics* and from the teaching of Esau, and sought to persuade his congregation of it. Some followed him, some didn't, and Leonard was cast out of his denomination and lost very much as a result of his stand for the truth.

Both Esau and Leonard invited Duncan Heaster to come to Malawi and baptize Leonard, but in an effort to bring about unity with the CBM, Heaster asked the CBM to interview and baptize Leonard Chaunga- which they did. Subsequently Duncan visited the group and assisted Esau and Leonard to baptize a number of their former church members. Brothers Chirwa and Chaunga became the most successful preachers in the Malawian Christadelphian community, going to their network of former church associates and teaching them through *Bible Basics*. The CBM accepted the new ecclesia, but wrote a letter to every Christadelphian in Malawi as follows- the original letter in Chichewa is viewable at

Many brothers and sisters appealed to the UK CBM and the brethren responsible for the letter, Peter Forbes and Mark Sheppard, to meet with Carelinks and the Heasters and resolve the situation. They refused, and therefore the situation spiralled downwards- or upwards, depending how one sees it. Many sound and conservative brethren in Malawi who had learnt the Truth from *Bible Basics* or had been baptized by the Heasters refused to disfellowship them. The position was especially acute in Nkhotakota, where Esau Chirwa and his group had come to the Truth directly through the teaching of Duncan Heaster. To be told they had to disfellowship the brother who had taught and in some cases baptized them was unacceptable to them. Duncan Heaster wrote a letter urging unity and saying that if any did not further fellowship him, he accepted this, but desperately wanted to see unity in Malawi. However, the CBM proceeded to disfellowship many groups and individuals who refused to go along with their position against Duncan Heaster and Carelinks.

Duncan Heaster asked Carelinks to take charge of the situation in Malawi as he did not want to see a division formed over himself. As a result, John Aldersley and his team from Carelinks New Zealand took over the work in Malawi, and visit regularly. John Aldersley was well qualified for the work, coming from a church founded by Barry Hodson, who in his time as a Christadelphian was one of the most dynamic and successful preachers of all time in New Zealand Christadelphian history, but was excluded for his dynamism and openness. We mention this because it shows a continuity of theme in the CBM's serious difficulty in coping with dynamic preachers. Richard Mysambosa, Barry Hodson, John Aldersley, the Heasters, brethren Chirwa and Chaunga... and this is just in the Malawian context. The same is evident in many countries.

John Aldersley and Carelinks New Zealand were faced with a position whereby over 300 brothers and sisters had either been baptized due to *Bible Basics* outreach or had been disfellowshipped by the CBM because of their refusal to stop working with one of the most dynamic movements of God in Malawi for many years. The various individuals and groups wanted a name. "Christadelphian" means "brethren in Christ", but seeing Christ is open to both sisters as well as brothers, the name "Believers in Christ" was thought of.

These are better days for the Truth in Malawi. Sound doctrine is being taught, NEV Bibles and Chichewa Bibles are freely available [the CBM sell Bibles to Christadelphians in Malawi, but many can't afford them], *Bible Basics* in Chichewa is available freely, most weeks there are additions to our number, the Carelinks New Zealand team are visiting regularly, and the spirit of Christ is evident as God without doubt blesses our community. Please pray for us and support the brethren who are printing and distributing Bibles and literature and seeking to help us.

