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A Pioneer Preacher in California

Jerry Rushford, *Pepperdine University*



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A Pioneer Preacher in California (1)

The California Gold Rush! With the exception of the Civil War, no other event in nineteenth-century America caused such an upheaval. James Marshall's discovery of gold on January 28, 1848, opened the floodgates to the American West and resulted in statehood for California in 1850.

The news accounts of the gold discoveries at Sutter's Mill on the American River were generally greeted with skepticism, until the stories were confirmed by President James Polk. In his State of the Union message to Congress on December 5, 1848, the President declared: "The accounts of the abundance of gold in that territory are of such an extraordinary character as would scarcely command belief, were they not corroborated by the authentic reports of officers in the public service."

This was the announcement that triggered the mad rush for gold. The assurance that gold in great quantities existed in California produced electrifying results. Almost overnight, some 100,000 restless people began making plans to go to the new El Dorado.

About 40,000 people came to California by sea in 1849-50, and an even larger number came overland. California's non-Indian population swelled from about 5,000 in 1845 to over 100,000 by 1850. This number had risen to 224,435 by the close of 1852. San Francisco was a village of 812 people in 1848, but by 1850 it had become a boom town with a population of more than 25,000.

While it is true that people came from all over the world to mine for gold in California, in the first five years the majority of immigrants came from the midwestern states of Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Kentucky, Tennessee, Missouri and Iowa. Coincidentally, these were the very states that formed the heartland of the Campbell-Stone movement to restore New Testament Christianity.

It was inevitable, therefore, that some of the members of this movement would be included in the migration to the gold fields. The preacher who would pioneer the work of the Restoration Movement in California was in the first wave of "49ers" who started across the overland route that spring. To Thomas Thompson belongs the honor of being the first preacher in the Church of Christ to engage in evangelistic work in California. He preached the first sermons, baptized the first converts, and helped to organize the first congregations.

Thomas Thompson was born in Christian County, Kentucky, on July 7, 1797. He was the great, great grandson of the Smithfield martyr, John Rogers (see *Fox's Book of Martyrs*, pp. 209-210). When he was a young boy, his parents moved to Missouri Territory and settled in a section known as the "Platt Purchase." The Thompsons were Baptists, and Thomas joined the Baptist Church around 1822. He became acquainted with the principles of the Restoration Movement through the

JERRY RUSHFORD

ministry of Thomas McBride. McBride had been associated with Barton Stone in Kentucky prior to relocating in Missouri in 1813.

McBride introduced Thompson to Alexander Campbell's monthly periodical entitled the *Christian Baptist*. Thompson later recalled:

About the year 1824, I commenced reading the *Christian Baptist*, which resulted in the conviction that the Baptist Church was not—so far as I had been taught—the true Church of Christ. By the *Christian Baptist*, my attention was turned to the New Testament as the only true and sufficient rule of faith and practice. I now began to read, believe and practice for myself; finding no authority in the New Testament for a Baptist Church, or its Confession of Faith. As I learned, I taught; laying aside all the human traditions I could discover. This resulted in my separation from the Baptists.

At that point in his life, Thompson was a man without a church. But he soon "organized a church in my own neighborhood, taking the New Testament as our only Creed and Discipline."

As early as 1825, Thomas Thompson was in communication with both Alexander Campbell and Barton Stone, and he was instrumental in encouraging the merger of the Campbell and Stone movements in Missouri in the early 1830's. Thompson preached all across the northern half of the state in the years 1830-1849, and he was successful in organizing numerous congregations. These were exciting years for the Restoration Movement in Missouri. From 500 members in 1830, the movement grew to encompass more than 15,000 baptized believers by 1849.

The list of Thompson's co-workers during these years included Thomas McBride, Joel Haden, Duke Young, Henry Thomas, Allen Wright, Thomas M. Allen, Jacob Creath, Jr., John S. Allen and D. Pat Henderson. In recalling the impact of Thompson's preaching in Missouri, Thomas P. Haley wrote:

His voice was strong and clear, his style conversational. He was remarkable for his great familiarity with the holy Scriptures. It was said that he had committed to memory every line of the New Testament and was thoroughly versed in the Old. He never opened the book when he recited his text, which was always an entire chapter, but repeated it from memory. His sermons were commentaries on the text, and exceedingly instructive. He was not, I think, regarded as a successful evangelist, and yet he baptized a great many persons and his converts were always well instructed, not simply in regard to the plan of salvation, but in the practical duties of Christian life.

Another preacher said of Thompson: "He was an able man in the gospel, was truly a man of faith, and forcibly reminded me of the lamented brother Benjamin Franklin."

In 1844, Thomas Thompson and John S. Allen were chosen by the churches in the Grand River country to travel as evangelists in the surrounding counties. As Allen remembered it:

The country being so sparsely settled, our rides were often long and wearisome, but we took great pleasure in our meetings, in seeing many of our fellow citizens bow to the authority of the gospel. At Linneus, Chillicothe, Gallatin and Trenton we held many successful meetings and planted the cause of primitive Christianity in the Grand River country. Our salaries were never computed. The brethren would sometimes give us fifty cents or a dollar, or a present of some sort. It was not the almighty dollar that caused us in those days to make the sacrifice and do the work we did, but we were prompted by our love for the cause and a great desire to establish it in this new country.

It was Thomas Thompson's "love for the cause" that led him to leave his home in Paris, Missouri, and join the throngs who were heading for California by wagon train in the spring of 1849. In next week's article we will focus on Thompson's pioneering work in the Golden State. Pepperdine Univ., Malibu, Calif. 90265

A Pioneer Preacher in California (2)

(See introductory article in last week's Firm Foundation.)

JERRY RUSHFORD

In the spring of 1849, 30,000 gold seekers started across the overland route to California. The covered wagon or "prairie schooner," symbolized this vast migration. Caravans averaged twenty-six wagons, each drawn by five yoke of oxen, or a span of ten mules.

Included among those famed "Argonauts of '49" was a gospel preacher named Thomas Thompson. After giving a quarter century of his life to the cause of Christ in Missouri, Thompson was now eager to plant the cause in a new land. He was joined on this difficult mission by his courageous wife and their children.

The overland route did not require much cash outlay, but it took a great deal of courage. The arduous journey of some two thousand miles across plains, mountains, and desert took about five months, and the trail was beset with every kind of danger.

The wagons traveled about fifteen miles a day over a thin trail. They were subjected to incessant storms, scorching heat, and stampedes from wandering buffalo herds. An even greater danger was the constant threat of a murderous attack by the fierce Sioux or other warlike Indian tribes. The twin specters of starvation and disease were never far removed from the minds of the fortyniners. From the Missouri River to the Rockies the ravages of cholera were frightful. Hundreds (some accounts say thousands) of people died along the route.

Thomas Thompson did not wait until California to begin sowing the seed of the kingdom. During the five month trek across the overland route, he preached the gospel to his fellow travelers as "opportunity afforded."

In September, 1849, the Thompsons arrived in California and settled temporarily at Gold Run in Placer County. In the midst of that hectic mining camp, where the inhabitants were obsessed with the search for gold, Thompson preached his first sermons in California.

A few months later, the Thompsons

moved to Coloma where gold was first discovered. There they took charge of a miner's boarding house which proved to be a profitable enterprise. This arrangement freed Thompson to preach frequently in mining camps from Oroville to Stockton. His faithful preaching was soon rewarded. He baptized his first converts in the spring of 1850. Marcus Wills and J. N. B. Wyatt were immersed into Christ in a mining pit near Coloma.

Thompson moved his family away from the mining country in the spring of 1851. The farm he purchased in the beautiful Santa Clara Valley became his home for the last twenty-one years of his life. It was from this place that he began the truly great work of rallying together the scattered Christians.

At the end of that summer, Thompson helped to organize the first congregation in California. On August 21, 1851, a church patterned after the New Testament model was called together in Stockton. On that historic occasion, Thompson preached to the twenty-one charter members who were assembled in the upper room of a hall located on the corner of San Joaquin Street and Weber Avenue. One of the charter members was W. W. Stevenson, only recently arrived from Little Rock, Arkansas. Stevenson became the regular preacher for the group. The first elders were W. B. Smith and A. N. Green.

A short time later, Thompson was instrumental in organizing the second congregation in the state. This was near his home in the Santa Clara Valley. The church met in a little vacant building on the road between his farm and the old Santa Clara Mission.

The first protracted meeting in California was conducted with the Santa Clara church. W. W. Stevenson was the evangelist in the twelve-day meeting. It resulted in twenty-seven additions to the church, including five members of Thomas Thompson's family. In a letter to Alex-

ander Campbell. Stevenson said of Thompson:

He did the immersing, with a solemnity I never witnessed before. He is the great, great grandson of the Smithfield martyr, John Rogers. He is the representative of the name, and a worthy son of so good a man. His relationship, his piety, his venerable gray hairs and Godly family, caused me to venerate him beyond any man I have met. He was overwhelmed with the success of the meeting, and when we parted, he gave me the ancient fraternal embrace.

In that same year of 1852, the Restoration Movement in California was strengthened with the arrival of J. P. McCorkle from Missouri. McCorkle settled in Napa County, thinking he was the only preacher in the state. When he heard about Thompson he was overjoyed. He immediately wrote to him and urged that they meet soon. Thompson's excited reply gave the details of when he would be in Napa. In later years, McCorkle remembered the moment:

Long, long will I remember that meeting. I can see him today, in my mind, as I saw him then as he came walking up to my humble home. We were glad to see each other, you may be sure. We talked, sang and prayed together. I heard him preach I thought the best sermon I ever heard. It did me good. It gave me strength. I felt like I could lean upon him, I walked by his side; he felt like a father to me in this strange land. We felt that we were not alone. We talked together about the great work that was to be done in California.

Thompson was 55 years old at the time, and McCorkle was 27. They were to be co-laborers in "the great work" in California for the next twenty years (1852-1872). During his thirty-five years of ministry in California (1851-1887), J. P. McCorkle would immerse more people into Christ than any other preacher in the history of the state.

(Continued on page 11)

A Lost Art

JOHN J. WRIGHT

Psalms 119:99—"I have more understanding than all my teachers, for thy testimonies are my meditation."

In the hustle-bustle of our 20th century culture a premium has been placed on production . . . *fast production*. The luxury of "taking time to think," pondering, musing, meditating . . . has become so expensive that it has nearly passed from our schedules entirely. Meditation has become a lost art. Research in "in." Micro-wave speed is "in." But, pondering . . . meditation . . . thinking . . . is "OUT!" It simply takes too much time.

Consider yourself, (if you dare) and how you approach the Bible and your faith. When you are confronted by a passage of scripture that you don't understand, is your first impulse to . . . (1) ponder the matter for yourself, or (2) ask someone who is "in the know?"

When someone has challenged something you believe so that

you have no ready reply, do you . . . (1) meditate carefully upon what your challenger has said weighing it in the light of God's revealed truth, or (2) run to a commentary or preacher for a quick answer?

When you read God's word do you . . . (1) listen quietly as he speaks to you with messages heretofore unheard by you and then meditate leisurely waiting for God to bless you with new understanding? Or, do you . . . (2) hurry through with your reading reaffirming to God once again what he has said and . . . what he meant by it?

I would like to suggest to you that many of us embarrassingly find ourselves in that latter group on every count. Because of the high cost of meditation we have substituted that which came cheaper. The product of our substitution has been . . . (1) less understanding, and (2) a second-hand faith. Perhaps one day, we will discover that we have been "penny wise and dollar foolish." Let's pray that we discover it soon!

6420 18th Ave. S., Richfield, MN. 55423

A Pioneer Preacher in California (3)

JERRY RUSHFORD

When Thomas Thompson corresponded with Alexander Campbell on Christmas Day, 1853, there were only three congregations of the Church of Christ in California. Stockton and Santa Clara with 60 members each, and Napa County with 20 or 30 members had all been established as a result of Thompson's pioneering efforts. Considering the difficulty of the field, this was a fine beginning. Nevertheless, Thompson was disappointed in the slow progress.

However, in 1854 the Restoration Movement in California enjoyed a year of significant expansion with the establishment of six new congregations. As expected, Thomas Thompson played a key role in this pivotal year. In his letter to Campbell on June 8, 1854, he shared the good news of three new churches:

On the first day of this year I organized a church at San Jose, with 12 members, immersing one of that number. On the first Lord's day in March, Bro. McCorkle and I held a meeting at Santa Rosa, planted a church of 4 members, including a preacher, proselyted from the Methodists, a man of much praise. He is preaching with success, and has added several to the church. On the 2nd Lord's day in March, we held a meeting at Napa, had 6 additions, and Bro. McCorkle has had several additions since. We had the labors of Bros. Correll and McCorkle at Santa Clara and vicinity on the 3rd and 4th Lord's days of May, when we had 14 additions—10 by immersion, 2 from the Baptists, and 2 united who had been members before. Bro. Stevenson organized a small church at San Francisco—10 or 12 members; and there might be one organized at Sacramento, with from 25 to 100 members, if they had a preacher of the right sort.

Congregations were also started that year at Gilroy, Woodland, and Vaca Valley, with Thompson assisting in the first two. Thompson's desire to see a church planted in Sacramento was realized the following year when he organized a congregation with 14 members.

It was in 1855 that Thompson urged his California brethren to support a yearly state meeting. The Restoration Movement back in the Midwest had benefited from the practice of coming together in an annual meeting. Thompson remembered how much the cause in Missouri had been strengthened when the churches started the state meetings in 1837.

The state meetings were born out of a need for more information about the progress of the cause in which all were interested. In addition to providing good preaching and enjoyable fellowship, the gatherings enabled the churches to explore ways in which they might cooperate together for the advancement of the gospel in their state. The meetings usually lasted several days.

The first California state meeting met in Stockton from October 17 to 19 in 1855. Members from each of the congregations were present, and everyone enthusiastically supported Thompson's suggestion that they meet together every autumn. The church in Vaca Valley asked for the privilege of hosting the second annual meeting in the fall of 1856.

The state meetings were never meant to develop into an organization that deprived the local churches of their autonomy. In explaining his motives in calling that first state meeting, Thompson later wrote:

In 1855 I proposed to the church at Santa Clara a plan of cooperation through a state meeting. This was to be presented to the several churches. The plan being made out and adopted by the Santa Clara church, they made it my duty to visit the other churches and submit the matter to them. This I did, and all of the other churches agreed to meet and cooperate. This plan strictly guarded church rights, and distinctly stated that the cooperation or state meeting should not interfere with church discipline, or in any way control the action of any congregation, the only object being for consultation and conference for the more successful spread of the gospel.

The California state meetings eventually became large family encampments which lasted for ten days. They usually began on a Friday and closed on the afternoon of the second Lord's day. One record says: "By 1860 it was common to have 5,000 people present on the Lord's day to break bread and hear the preaching of the gospel. One year at Vacaville, the crowd reached 7,000 in number, by actual count." This description bears a striking resemblance to our modern-day Yosemite Family Encampment in California which lasts for a full week and often draws over 5,000 in attendance.

At the annual state meeting in 1860, the churches gathered statistics for the first time. It was revealed that there were 27 congregations of the Church of Christ in the state with a combined membership of 1,223. Allowing for some scattered Christians who lived in areas where there was no church, the numerical strength of the movement was probably close to 1,500 in 1860. All of these members and churches were located in Northern California. It would be another ten years before the first preacher arrived in Southern California.

Thomas Thompson was 63 years old when he attended the great family encampment in 1860. It must have been an event filled with a sense of personal accomplishment for him. Ten years earlier he and his family had been alone in the State. Now the cause was flourishing in several communities, and additional preachers were arriving each year. More than one hundred persons were baptized into Christ at the 1860 encampment, including Linsey Carson, an old pioneer and brother to the famous "Kit" Carson.

The Restoration Movement in California even had its own monthly periodical by 1860. *The Western Evangelist*, ably edited by W. W. Stevenson, proclaimed the "plea" of the movement and chronicled the growth and expansion of the church in California. Far more encouraging for the future, the first Christian college in the state was soon to be established in the city of Woodland. On March 4, 1861, the same day Abraham Lincoln was inaugurated, Hesperian College enrolled its first students.

In our next article we will conclude this series by showing the lasting contribution of Thomas Thompson to the Restoration Movement in California.

Pepperdine University, Malibu, California 90265

A Pioneer Preacher in California (4)

JERRY RUSHFORD

The Restoration Movement in California enjoyed steady growth and expansion in the 1860's. From 27 congregations and almost 1,500 members in 1860, the movement grew to encompass 50 congregations and 3,000 members by 1872. During these years the churches in California were blessed with Christian periodicals such as *The Western Evangelist* (1858-1863), *The Christian Teacher* (1864-1866), *The Pacific Gospel Herald* (1867-1870), and *The Bible Expositor* (1871-1874). The annual family encampments continued to draw great crowds. The 1863 encampment at Vacaville drew 5,000 on the second Lord's day, and the 1864 meeting at Santa Rosa drew 7,000 on the second Lord's day.

Hesperian College, located in Woodland, became known as "The Bethany of California" in the 1860's. This was a reference to Alexander Campbell's Bethany College which had served as a model to the founders of Hesperian College. One visitor to California said of the college: "It is a good institution, under the special patronage of the Christian brotherhood of this coast, with 120 students in its classes."

Although Thomas Thompson was no longer a young man in the decade of the 1860's, he remained a tireless worker on behalf of the churches. In a letter to the *Christian Standard*, one of his colleagues said: "Elder Thomas Thompson, of Santa Clara, like the Master, goes about doing good." Thompson traveled much of the time in an old topless buggy pulled by a gray horse called "Old Charley." The old pioneer preacher and his faithful horse had been a familiar sight on the California scene for many years.

In addition to his travels among the churches, Thompson faithfully served the Santa Clara church as an elder. When one of his fellow elders, Solomon Rogers, died in 1863, Thompson sent an obituary account to Alexander Campbell in which he said of Rogers:

He joined the Baptist church in his 19th year, and acted as deacon in that church for a number of years. But on hearing the reformation doctrine, as taught by W. Scott, he embraced it, and joined the church of Christ at Carthage, Ohio; was soon afterwards appointed one of its Elders, and has acted in that office in each congregation that he has been a member of, and of Santa Clara until his death. The community, and especially the church at Santa Clara have never suffered so great a loss before, as when this old, zealous, affectionate Elder left us.

Although the death of Rogers was a great loss for the Santa Clara church, the congregation continued to increase in membership to the point where they were able to construct a larger meetinghouse. Since the time when Thompson organized the congregation in 1852, they had been meeting in an old vacant building near his farm. They were finally able to move into their own "very pretty chapel" in 1866.

One correspondent for the *Christian Standard* who was passing through Santa Clara in the late 1860's wrote: "Brother Thompson, who has long lived here, and held the office of Elder,

is still the leading member, and performs his duties, at the age of seventy-two or three, with a vigor and zeal that might put younger champions to shame."

One of the "younger champions" in the state was James Anderson, Thompson's son-in-law. Anderson met the Thompson family in the mining country in 1850, and he later married Frances Thompson. He was soon to discover that his father-in-law was a persuasive evangelist. Thompson not only baptized Anderson into Christ, he encouraged him to preach the gospel. Anderson began preaching in 1857, and by the 1860's he had become one of the most effective evangelists in the State. One account says that "few men were better known among the pioneers and workers" of the Restoration Movement in California than James Anderson.

The last family encampment that Thomas Thompson was able to attend was the one held near his home in the fall of 1871. He seemed to have a premonition that this might be his last opportunity to meet with his fellow-Christians. Prior to the meeting he sent the following appeal around the State in the church papers: "Will you please say to sisters and brethren, that it is my special request that they all attend our state meeting, that I may see them once more in the flesh."

Thompson had a wonderful time at the 1871 encampment, but his premonition was true. On April 14, 1872, just three months before his 75th birthday, he laid aside his earthly task of preaching the gospel and went home to be with his Lord. With the death of Thomas Thompson, the Restoration Movement in California closed the pages on its exciting first chapter.

Thompson had been the lonely pioneer in the fall of 1849. But after a ministry of more than 22 years, he had seen the movement grow from one family to 50 established churches and 3,000 members. The foundation he laid was solid. The church in California enjoyed both unity and expansion throughout his lifetime. At the time of his death, a second Christian college in the state was preparing to open in Santa Rosa in the fall of 1872; and the work in Southern California was just beginning.

Twenty years later, the Restoration Movement in California would be tragically dividing over the establishment of a state missionary society and the introduction of musical instruments into the public worship of the church. But the generation of pioneers who brought the movement to California were blessed with unity of purpose.

I recently stood at the grave of Thomas Thompson in the Santa Clara Cemetery and thought of his great contribution to the cause of Christ in Missouri and California. I felt a strong kinship to this brother I had never met. Pioneers like Thompson blazed the trail for others who were to follow, and I am grateful for their accomplishments. We can be proud of a heritage that produced servants like Thomas Thompson.

Pepperdine University, Malibu, California 90265