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“DR. THOMAS OF TORONTO”:  
THE LIFE AND MINISTRY OF BENJAMIN DANIEL THOMAS (1843-1917)



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THE LIFE AND MINISTRY OF BENJAMIN DANIEL THOMAS (1843-1917)<sup>1</sup>

It was in September of 1868 that the congregation of Tabernacle English Baptist Church that met for worship on Water Street in Neath, Glamorganshire, said farewell to their minister Benjamin Daniel Thomas (1843-1917), who had served the congregation, his first pastorate, for the previous six years.<sup>2</sup> With his wife and children, he had decided to leave Wales and emigrate to Pennsylvania in the United States. The *Swansea Herald* reported details of the official farewell, at which a gift of appreciation, a purse of £30, was given to Rev. Thomas and heart-felt thanks expressed for his ministry.<sup>3</sup> But what was not reported was why he and his wife, Mary, née Jones (d.1886),<sup>4</sup> were leaving Wales.

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries numbers of Thomas’ Baptist forbears had also left Wales, journeying across the Atlantic for religious freedom. By the nineteenth century, though, Welsh emigration westwards was largely owing to economic reasons. Economic depression and social distress in the 1820s and 1830s following the Napoleonic Wars made American land, business opportunities, and social egalitarianism quite attractive to a good number of the Welsh, although Welsh emigration never matched that from other parts of Great Britain, especially Ireland. The population sizes of Wales and Ireland during this era were not too different, but the Irish emigrated in their millions while the Welsh left Wales only in tens of

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<sup>2</sup> For the biographical details of Thomas’ life I am indebted to the following: in William Cathcart, *The Baptist Encyclopaedia* (Philadelphia: Louis H. Everts, 1881), 1147 (along with this brief biographical sketch there is also a portrait of Thomas in his late thirties); “Thomas, Benjamin Daniel” in George Maclean Rose, *A Cyclopaedia of Canadian Biography: Being Chiefly Men of the Time* (Toronto: Rose Publishing Co., 1888), 379-380; “Thomas, Rev. Benjamin Daniel” in Morgan, ed., *Canadian Men and Women of the Time*, 1005; “Thomas, Rev. Benjamin Daniel” in Henry James Morgan, ed., *The Canadian Men and Women of the Time: A Hand-book of Canadian Biography of Living Characters* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.; Toronto: William Briggs, 1912), 1093; F. Tracy, “In Memoriam Dr. B.D. Thomas”, *The Canadian Baptist*, 89, no.4 (February 15, 1943), 2.

<sup>3</sup> “Testimonial to a Neath Baptist Minister” [Newspaper clipping in an envelope in B.D. Thomas, “My Pastorate in Toronto” (Scrapbook of newspaper clippings, McMaster Divinity College Archives, McMaster University, Hamilton, Ontario)]. Thomas commenced this scrapbook of newspaper cuttings about his ministry, his sermons, and Jarvis Street Baptist Church when he came to Toronto in the autumn of 1882, but it also contains items from earlier phases of his ministry.

<sup>4</sup> “Thomas, Rev. Benjamin Daniel” in Henry James Morgan, ed., *The Canadian Men and Women of the Time: A Hand-book of Canadian Biography* (Toronto: William Briggs, 1898), 1005.

thousands. One key reason for this difference in numbers of emigrants was the mid-nineteenth-century development of South Wales into one of the world's leading industrial centres.

What is almost certain, though, about Thomas' decision to emigrate is that such a momentous decision would not have been taken without prayer, for uppermost with him as a Christian was obedience to the Lord Christ and doing his Master's will. As he stated in a sermon on 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18, "the determinative quality in all true prayer is acquiescence in the divine will."<sup>5</sup>

*"The supreme aim of the gospel ministry"*

Benjamin Daniel Thomas had been raised in a pastor's home. His father, Benjamin Thomas (1792-1862), was the third pastor of Bethesda Baptist Church, Narberth, Pembrokeshire. The senior Thomas had been called to this church in 1823 after studying under William Steadman (1764-1837) in the Horton Academy at Bradford, Yorkshire, and had faithfully pastored the Pembrokeshire cause for the next thirty-nine years.<sup>6</sup> The younger Thomas had moved away from home during his early teens to study at Graig House Academy, a grammar school in Swansea,<sup>7</sup> for four years before going to Haverfordwest Baptist College, which had been founded in the late 1830s. Here, under the principalship of Thomas Davies (1812-1895), who also served as the pastor of Bethesda Baptist Church at Haverfordwest, he pursued a regular programme of theological study and appears to have graduated in 1861, the year that he was ordained.

As noted above, his first pastoral charge was at Neath, where he went in 1862 when he was but nineteen. Two years later he married Mary Jones. The couple had six children, one of whom,

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<sup>5</sup> "The Habitual Temper of the Christian Life" in his *The Secret of Divine Silence and Other Sermons* (Toronto: William Briggs, 1903), 213. This book of sermons was re-published eight years later as *Sermons: Preached in the Jarvis Street Baptist Church, Toronto* (Toronto: William Briggs, 1911).

<sup>6</sup> For a history of this church, see W.H. Williams, "History of Bethesda, Narberth" in *Bethesda Baptist Church, Narberth, 1808-1958* (Narberth, Pembrokeshire: H.G. Walters, 1958), 13-20. In the Canadian Baptist Archives at McMaster Divinity College, there is a ms. book of the senior Thomas' sermons.

<sup>7</sup> This grammar school was run by a Baptist minister George Pritchard Evans (1820-1874), a graduate of Bristol Baptist Academy and one-time missionary to Jamaica. He ran the Swansea grammar school, which educated numerous ministers, from 1846 till his death. See William Joseph Rhys, "Evans, George Pritchard" in R.T. Jenkins, ed., *The Dictionary of Welsh Biography Down to 1940* (London: The Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion, 1959), 235.

Llewellyn Thomas, followed in his father's and grandfather's footsteps and became a preacher of the gospel. Their marriage, though, was a brief eighteen years, for Mary died in 1886 in Toronto.

When Thomas and his family emigrated to America in the autumn of 1868, they went first to Pittston, Pennsylvania—Pennsylvania being a favourite locale for many Welsh emigrants. There he pastored the Baptist Church for three years, from 1868 to 1871. He then moved to the Fifth Baptist Church, Philadelphia, one of the largest Baptist works in that part of the state, where he served for eleven years. A defining mark of his ministry during this period was evangelistic preaching, preaching that made a point of seeking the conversion of unbelievers. As he said in a sermon he first preached around 1878:

A church (I care not what her wealth or influence or numbers) is a failure unless souls are born in her, unless she walks the earth, so to speak, under the profound impulse of a divine unction and in the enthusiasm of conscious power, unless she can...quicken dead souls into an immortal being by the supernatural energies of her God-given life. This is her glory and her praise...<sup>8</sup>

This meant that the salvation of the lost, Thomas continued, should be “the supreme aim of the gospel ministry”:

To prostitute the pulpit to any other end than this, to make it the Thermopylae for intellectual display or rhetorical effect, to use it for mercenary or ambitious designs, or to employ it as an arena for personal exhibition, must be an impertinence for which a parallel could scarcely be produced. To have no higher aim in our ministrations than to gratify and amuse, or to seek to have the interest of our audiences culminate in admiration of ourselves, is an exhibition at which angels might well weep. ...The one dominating, controlling, all-subduing purpose of the ministerial life should be the salvation of souls. This should be ever nearest to our hearts and foremost in our lives.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> “The Glory of the Church” in Thomas, *The Secret of Divine Silence*, 81-82. For another example of a sermon he preached during his Philadelphia pastorate, see *Memorial Sermon on William Mann, of Philadelphia* ([Philadelphia, 1881]).

<sup>9</sup> “The Glory of the Church” in Thomas, *The Secret of Divine Silence*, 82-83. See also Thomas’ remarks about a close friend, the Welsh preacher Frederick Evans (1840-1897): “The preaching that had no divine sacrifice for sin to announce, no almighty Saviour to proclaim, no perfected righteousness to offer, no eternal life to invite to, he from his very heart despised”—and, it might be added, so did Thomas [*Frederick Evans, D.D. (Ednyfed). A Memorial*, ed. B.D. Thomas (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1899), 101]. On Evans, see also David Emrys Evans, “Evans, Frederick” in *Dictionary of Welsh Biography*, 234.

Not surprisingly, other North American Baptist churches that were without pastors began to consider calling a preacher with this kind of evangelistic emphasis in his pulpit ministry. One such church was Jarvis Street Baptist Church in Toronto, Ontario, where the type of evangelistic emphasis that marked Thomas' preaching was highly prized.<sup>10</sup>

*"The hand of the Lord"*

The Jarvis Street congregation was the oldest Baptist work in Toronto, having been founded in the 1818. As Thomas later noted of the church's earliest years, the number of members being small and the location of their first building on the northeast corner of Lombard and Church Streets not being the best—it "put all real progress amongst the impossibilities"—meant that the church had a "very checkered career" during its first three decades of existence.<sup>11</sup> All of this changed for the better with the coming of Robert Alexander Fyfe (1816-1878) as the fourth pastor in 1844. The church began to grow significantly and by 1882, when the church called Thomas, the church met in an impressive church building on the corner of Jarvis and Gerrard Streets. The new church building had been designed by Henry Langley (d.1907), the leading church architect in late nineteenth-century Ontario. Langley—with his partners, his brother Edward, who was a builder and Edmund Burke, who was his nephew—designed the Jarvis Street church in the Neo-Gothic style that was then all the rage for church structures and that outwardly combined elements inspired by medieval cathedrals.<sup>12</sup> Up to thirteen hundred or so could easily meet for worship seated in the pews in the main auditorium of the church and its gallery. If extra chairs were added another seven hundred could be accommodated. During Thomas' pastorate, the average Sunday morning worship attendance was around nine hundred with twelve to fifteen hundred filling the auditorium for the evening service.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> For a brief history of this church, see Glenn V. Tomlinson and Andrew M. Fountain, eds., *"From Strength to Strength" A Pictorial History Of Jarvis Street Baptist Church 1818-1993* (Toronto: Gospel Witness Publications, 1993). For the story of its origins, see Glenn Tomlinson, *From Scotland to Canada: The Life of Pioneer Missionary Alexander Stewart* (Guelph, Ontario: Joshua Press, 2008), Chapter 8. See the article on Stewart by Glenn Tomlinson in this issue of *The Gospel Witness*.

<sup>11</sup> B. D. Thomas, "The Beginning Growth of Baptist Interests in Toronto" (Handwritten ms., McMaster Divinity College Archives, McMaster University, Hamilton, Ontario).

<sup>12</sup> For a description of the church during Thomas' time as pastor, see J.R.N., "Pew and Pulpit in Toronto.—VII. At Jarvis Street Baptist Church" (Newspaper clipping in Thomas, "My Pastorate in Toronto"), in which the architectural style of Jarvis Street Baptist Church is described as "auditorium-gothic." See also the description in *Sketches in City Churches* (Toronto: J. Ross Robertson, 1886), 26-28.

<sup>13</sup> *Sketches in City Churches*, 26.

The previous minister, the American Baptist John Castle (1830-1890) stepped down from the pastorate of Jarvis Street in 1880 when he assumed the Presidency of Toronto Baptist College—which later became McMaster University.<sup>14</sup> Castle had come to Toronto from Philadelphia and it may well have been through his acquaintance with the Baptist causes in Philadelphia that Thomas was asked to fill the pulpit for two July Sundays in 1882.<sup>15</sup> Immediately after the service on the second Sunday, July 23, a special meeting was convened to consider extending a call to Thomas to be the pastor of the church. The members at this meeting voted unanimously to call Thomas, who sent an acceptance letter on August 9.<sup>16</sup> Thomas told the Toronto Baptists that making the decision to relocate to Canada was “one of the most painful ordeals” he had ever experienced. He found it extremely difficult to contemplate leaving those whom he had come to love in his Philadelphia pastorate, who had been so kind to him and who were, Thomas said, “most earnest and united” in their not wanting him to leave them. “If it were not for the conviction which has fastened itself upon my mind, that the hand of the Lord is in it,” Thomas continued, he most definitely would have declined. But his heart’s desire was to submit to the Lord’s leadership and have his “steps so ordered that the largest Glory may result to His great name.”<sup>17</sup>

Thomas officially began his ministry in the church on the second Sunday in October 1882,<sup>18</sup> and the following month, he and his wife, as well two of their daughters—Gertie and Millie, who had been baptized as believers in Philadelphia—were received into the membership of the Jarvis Street congregation.<sup>19</sup> There was also a special service of induction held at which a number of the key Toronto Baptist leaders of the day, including Castle, Joshua Denovan, and E.W. Dadson

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<sup>14</sup> For John Castle, see B.D. Thomas, “Pulpit and Platform. ‘A Servant of His Age’ ” (Newspaper clipping in Thomas, “My Pastorate in Toronto”). This is a memorial sermon for Castle based on Acts 13:30 and given at Jarvis Street on June 22, 1890. At the end of it there is a biographical sketch of Castle.

<sup>15</sup> “Minutes of the Jarvis Street Baptist Church, Toronto, Ontario, April 24, 1881-April 20, 1892” (Jarvis Street Baptist Church, Toronto, Ontario), Minutes of July 16 and 23, 1882.

<sup>16</sup> “Minutes of the Jarvis Street Baptist Church”, Minutes of July 23, 1882; August 13, 1882 (the letter was dated August 9, 1882). There is also an extant telegram dated August 9, 1882, sent from Ocean Beach, New Jersey, that indicated that this letter was on its way (McMaster Divinity College Archives, McMaster University, Hamilton, Ontario).

<sup>17</sup> Letter to Jarvis Street Baptist Church, August 9, 1882 in “Minutes of the Jarvis Street Baptist Church”, Minute of August 13, 1882.

<sup>18</sup> Newspaper clipping in Thomas, “My Pastorate in Toronto”; *Souvenir of the Tenth Anniversary of the Settlement of Rev. B.D. Thomas with the Jarvis Street Baptist Church* (Toronto: Davis & Henderson, 1892), 9.

<sup>19</sup> “Minutes of the Jarvis Street Baptist Church”, Minute of November 5, 1882.

(1845-1900), took part.<sup>20</sup> A newspaper report that Thomas preserved of his induction as pastor mentioned that the welcome accorded to Thomas by “the members of his flock and Baptists of Toronto was enthusiastic in the extreme” with some twelve hundred present on the occasion.<sup>21</sup>

When Thomas came to the church he soon realized that the membership roll, which stood at 718, was somewhat inflated. Through careful revision a more accurate number of 612 was reached.<sup>22</sup> Over the next ten years, 950 were received into the church—432 through conversion and baptism and 518 by letters of dismissal from other churches. At the same time, though, 727 had either left or died, giving a net gain of 223 over the decade.<sup>23</sup> During his second decade of ministry, another 695 joined the church, 288 by baptism after conversion and 407 by dismissal from another Baptist cause. When Thomas resigned the pastoral charge of the church in the summer of 1903, the membership stood at 896.<sup>24</sup> What is noteworthy is that during his pastorate the numbers attending the mid-week prayer-meeting averaged between 400 and 500, something that was considered remarkable even in that day of large congregations.<sup>25</sup>

All of this growth came at a time when people were beginning to move out of the inner city where the church was located for what were then the suburbs. And although Thomas himself distrusted statistics—the “summing up of the results of spiritual activity by an imposing array of figures has always appeared to me,” he said on one occasion, “a vain-glorious exhibition”<sup>26</sup>—these figures do indicate that his ministry was powerfully owned by God for the conversion and blessing of many in Toronto during the final two decades of the nineteenth century.

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<sup>20</sup> On Denovan, see O.C.S. Wallace, *Joshua Denovan* (Toronto: Standard Publ. Co., 1901); on Dadson, see Jones H. Farmer, ed., *E.W. Dadson, B.A., D.D., the man and his message* (Toronto: William Briggs, 1902). Thomas preached a funeral sermon for Dadson from 1 Timothy 4:6 and gave a tribute to Denovan based on Romans 1:1 (Newspaper clippings in Thomas, “My Pastorate in Toronto”).

<sup>21</sup> Newspaper clipping in Thomas, “My Pastorate in Toronto.”

<sup>22</sup> *Souvenir of the Tenth Anniversary*, 9.

<sup>23</sup> *Souvenir of the Tenth Anniversary*, 9-10.

<sup>24</sup> “Rev. Dr. Thomas Resigns” (Newspaper clipping in Thomas, “My Pastorate in Toronto”).

<sup>25</sup> *Sketches in City Churches*, 28; “Rev. Dr. Thomas” (Newspaper clipping in Thomas, “My Pastorate in Toronto”). The latter also describes Thomas’ public prayers at the prayer-meeting: “poems of adoration, thankfulness and desire for uplifting into better life and more pious impulse...the Psalmist seems to be his model.”

<sup>26</sup> *Souvenir of the Tenth Anniversary*, 9.

One final point that needs to be stressed about Thomas was that although he came to love Canada,<sup>27</sup> he never lost his love for Wales, returning there a number of times for vacation during his Toronto pastorate. As he said one occasion, after one such vacation in Wales:

...for miniature scenes of natural loveliness, for narrow mountain gorges, for romantic glens nestling at the base of wild and rugged steeps, for beautiful streams breaking here and there into cascades and waterfalls, and for a simplicity of life beautified with a religious quality, Wales is unsurpassed.<sup>28</sup>

On these visits to Wales, Thomas would usually spend several weeks at Narberth where he would preach in the church his father had pastored and would be known as “Dr. Thomas of Toronto.”<sup>29</sup> In fact, so enamoured was Thomas of his Welsh heritage that on one occasion as he was reflecting on the beauty of the Welsh language he stated that it was “destined to be spoken in the new Eden to which we all look forward with fervent expectation”!<sup>30</sup>

*“To be a preacher”*

Thomas was also convinced—and this on much surer grounds than his linguistic expectations—that if Wales

has not produced statesmen and artists, philosophers and scholars, who could stand without suggestion of inferiority beside the best product of other lands, she has produced preachers who certainly could. What philosophers were in Greece, and artists in Italy, preachers have been and still continue to be in Wales, the consummate blossoming of her richest life.

...it is but natural that the pulpit should strongly appeal to the imagination of the youth of the principality when brought under the regenerating influence of God’s Holy Spirit. To be a preacher, to the Welsh lad of fifty years ago [i.e., the 1840s] was a greater object of aspiration than to be aught else beneath the sun.<sup>31</sup>

The final remarks probably well reflect Thomas’ own desires after he was converted, for there is good evidence that he began to preach in his teens.

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<sup>27</sup> See, for example, his report about enjoying winter sports in Montreal, “From Toronto” (Newspaper clipping in Thomas, “My Pastorate in Toronto”).

<sup>28</sup> “Vacation Experiences” (Newspaper clipping in Thomas, “My Pastorate in Toronto”).

<sup>29</sup> Williams, “History of Bethesda, Narberth”, 16.

<sup>30</sup> “Vacation Experiences” (Newspaper clipping in Thomas, “My Pastorate in Toronto”).

<sup>31</sup> Thomas, ed., *Frederick Evans, D.D.*, 92, 95. For similar words, see “Vacation Experiences” (Newspaper clipping in Thomas, “My Pastorate in Toronto”).

By the time Thomas came to Toronto he was at the height of his powers as a preacher. One of those who heard him at this time likened him to a prophet, a man “with a message” and noted that “to listen to Dr. Thomas is to be reminded of the orthodoxy of thirty or forty years ago,” that is, the 1840s, before the advent of Higher Criticism that brought many to doubt the veracity of God’s Word.<sup>32</sup> Another called him a “most powerful and eloquent preacher.”<sup>33</sup> In contrast to other popular preachers of the Victorian era, though, Thomas was not considered an orator by those who heard him, for his preaching style tended to be free from the sort of linguistic ornamentation favoured by many in his day.<sup>34</sup> Moreover, Thomas was careful not to play on the emotions of his hearers,<sup>35</sup> although one critic felt that he needed to be more direct in his preaching and point out how men and women are “seriously deformed by sin.”<sup>36</sup> After Thomas’ death, it was noted that he was not fond of controversy, yet, there is good evidence, as shall be seen below, that Thomas was not hesitant in proclaiming all of God’s truth as found in his Word. In Thomas’ opinion, it was vital for Christians to be deeply committed to the Scriptures and the whole of their truth, for they were living in a day

when nothing appears to be established, when transitions and transformations, the most rapid and amazing, are taking place around us. The swirling waters of intellectual speculation are casting up the deposits of centuries. The very foundations of belief are undermined... There are those who assure us that we have been deluded; that the citadel of our faith is a poor, tawdry fabric, reared by superstition and ignorance; that the highest truths in which we have sought comfort and inspiration are without foundation; that is nothing is absolutely certain that is not open to scientific or mathematical demonstration.<sup>37</sup>

For Thomas, there was only one resting place for him and those to whom he preached: “the bulwark of our strength is the word of God.”<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> J.R.N., “Pew and Pulpit in Toronto.—VII. At Jarvis Street Baptist Church.”

<sup>33</sup> Morgan, ed., *Canadian Men and Women of the Time* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.), 1093.

<sup>34</sup> *Sketches in City Churches*, 31; J.R.N., “Pew and Pulpit in Toronto.—VII. At Jarvis Street Baptist Church.”

<sup>35</sup> “Rev. Dr. Thomas.”

<sup>36</sup> “Rev. Dr. Thomas.”

<sup>37</sup> *Denominational Esprit de Corps* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, [187-?]), 10.

<sup>38</sup> *Denominational Esprit de Corps*, 9. In a sermon on John 16:12-14 (Newspaper clipping in Thomas, “My Pastorate in Toronto”), Thomas asserted that “the Spirit always operates in harmony with the revealed truth and always glorifies Christ. Accept no teaching, believe in no ministry, follow no leadership which is not prepared to submit itself to these two tests.”

From his scrapbook of newspaper clippings one gets a good idea of the range of texts on which Thomas preached, for many of the clippings are newspaper transcripts of sermons that he gave. Although Thomas does not appear to have preached through particular books as some earlier Baptists had done—men like Andrew Fuller (1754-1815), for example<sup>39</sup>—he did preach from a variety of passages throughout the Scriptures. In this method of preaching he resembled one of his heroes, his older contemporary Charles Haddon Spurgeon (1834-1892).

### *Final days*

Thomas resigned from the Jarvis Street pastorate in the summer of 1903. The main reasons for his doing so was simply the fact that at the age of sixty-seven Thomas found “the increasing responsibilities of the large church were becoming too heavy.”<sup>40</sup> His retirement took him to Grimsby, Ontario, where he lived till his death on October 26, 1917. The Sunday prior to his death, he attended the worship of his old church, Jarvis Street Baptist Church, where an Englishman, T.T. Shields (1873-1955) was now the pastor. Thomas and Shields were similar: they were both firmly convinced that the central solution to the need of the age was the preaching of the gospel. The main reason for Thomas’ being at Jarvis Street was to hear his son, Llewellyn, preach at the evening service. He died four days later. It is doubtful that he could have desired a more appropriate closing to his long life.

In a graduation address that Thomas once delivered on 1 Kings 7:22a (“Upon the tops of the pillars was lily work”), he observed that:

All Christian character is royal. The most insignificant stone in this spiritual temple [of the church] is sublime. The imperial agencies of the Holy Spirit give grandeur to the poorest lives. There is not one so low and ignorant but that brought beneath the regenerating and purifying influences of God’s saving grace shall one day shine in burnished beauty. But there are some who occupy positions of special prominence and distinction; who stand forth in the broad spaces of the supernal structure as its supporting and adorning pillars.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Thomas admired Fuller as one of those Baptists—he mentions him along with Carey, Robert Hall, Jr. (1764-1831), and William Knibb (1803-1845)—whose names “have not been exceeded in lustre since apostolic times” and who have “shed an undying resplendence upon our [i.e. Baptist] history” (Newspaper clipping in Thomas, “My Pastorate in Toronto”).

<sup>40</sup> “Rev. Dr. Thomas Resigns.”

<sup>41</sup> “Pulpit and Platform. Strength and Beauty” (Newspaper clipping in Thomas, “My Pastorate in Toronto”).

By God's grace, Benjamin Daniel Thomas had been such a pillar—in Wales, America, and Canada.