

Stephen Cheek – The man who lit the spark (1852⁴-1883)

Stephen Cheek was born in Essex, England to Thomas Cheek and his wife, Martha. Thomas Cheek was a distant cousin to the renowned British evangelist, Charles Haddon Spurgeon. There is debate about the actual year of Cheek's birth, but there is increasing evidence for 20 December 1852 as the correct date. Thomas and Martha left England with their four young children and landed in Launceston, Tasmania, on 2 April 1855. The family settled in the Evandale district for the first five years, before moving to Launceston in 1860.⁵ Stephen attended the Public School there for the next four years, until in 1864 Thomas purchased some scrubby land from the Government, four miles from the nearest bush track in the vicinity of Rosevale, west of Launceston. Stephen continued his studies at night, and in 1871, Allen Baxter from the Hagley State School drew Stephen away from the relative isolation of the family farm to give him the opportunity to qualify as a teacher with the Tasmanian Board of Education – an opportunity Stephen took with both hands by passing the examination.⁶ He was also teaching in the Rosevale Sunday School and, it seemed, was becoming more and more active in the ministry of the Congregational Church.

Through their Christian Congregational beliefs and practices, there was a deeply rooted sense of biblical church independence in Cheek's family. Cheek went on to become the Superintendent of the local Congregational Sunday School. Cheek's attention was drawn to Churches of Christ through a series of debates over infant baptism in the Congregational paper, the 'Day Star'. The proponent of believer's baptism in these literary debates was George Moysey, the minister at the Church of Christ in Hobart. However, following Cheek's baptism on 5 December 1875, Cheek then associated with the Brethren Churches in his area, becoming an evangelist. He planted churches in Tasmania, which he later brought into the Churches of Christ movement.

What drew Cheek to make the move from his Congregational Church upbringing and Brethren practice and become involved with Churches of Christ? As just stated, he had read early material about the message of the Churches of Christ. Something of the message of being simply Christian, of being free of denominational ties, of basing one's personal and church life upon Christ and the Bible alone as his guide, entirely captured him. When these truths dawned on him, Cheek became an ardent evangelist for the person of Christ and the message of Churches of Christ. As Clow reminds us, this was not an easy move to make, bringing with it an end to his career and to many relationships: "He gave up all he had striven for in life and surrendered his position in the Department of Education – for what? Nothing definite that man could offer him."⁷

After this decision, Cheek went to southern Tasmania, preaching in the New Ground area, baptising some 40 people in 1879. It was here that Cheek also launched his magazine, 'Truth in Love', which would continue on through his ministry in Queensland.⁸ Cheek also pioneered churches in parts of rural Victoria during this period (in the Elphinstone, Taradale and Drummond region), where he met with good success. However, to be an evangelist in the 1870s and 1880s was no easy task. Upon returning to Tasmania, Cheek went to Bream Creek on the Tasman Peninsula and – amid great opposition – planted a church there in February 1879 with an initial membership of 50 people.⁹ Cheek left Bream Creek in April 1879, only to return in September of that year, where the hostility he had endured previously manifested itself in a savage assault. Court records show that Cheek was flogged, beaten and pelted with eggs, as well as being threatened that if he did not leave Bream Creek by the next day, he would be "tied to a tree and his flesh separated from his bones."¹⁰ The offenders were later tried, and found guilty, but Cheek's attorney made it clear that his client was not seeking severe damages. Cheek's manner during and after the trial must have struck a chord – the persecution stopped and, in 1881, Cheek baptised one of his assailants, Albert Mundy.¹¹



FW Troy & BC Black

On to Queensland

In Queensland, James H Johnson had moved to Toowoomba in 1876¹² from the Church of Christ at Cardigan (Victoria). There, he had managed to sway a Baptist minister who also became his brother-in-law, Frederick W Troy, over to Churches of Christ principles. Troy headed south to Victoria in 1882, where he asked the Conference for an evangelist to be sent to Queensland. This request was refused, primarily due to their being no funds for such a venture. Yet Cheek, who was in Melbourne during this time, felt the stirrings of a call to go north to Queensland. Troy was introduced to Stephen Cheek and, after a visit to the Tasman Peninsula to see the fruits of Cheek's labour at Bream Creek, Clow suggests that "they returned and the heart of Cheek was now aglow for an effort in Queensland".¹³ The two then headed north, spending some time in Newtown, Sydney, before boarding the *Derwent* and landing in Brisbane on 27 July 1882¹⁴. Cheek arrived without ready funds, without definite plans to even have funds sent to him from Victoria or Tasmania, no overcoat, and "but one suit of clothes that was well on the wear".¹⁵

Nationalism

It was in the 1880s that the idea of one united nation, rather than a collection of separate colonies was gathering support. In January 1881, at an inter-colonial conference held in Sydney, Henry Parkes, then Premier of New South Wales, planted the seed of the idea of a federation of colonies that would gather irresistible momentum, ultimately leading to the formation of the nation of Australia on 1 January 1901.

It was, therefore, a changing world when Stephen Cheek came into Christian ministry. His family had left behind the 'old world' of England to become part of the strange new world of the colonies founded on the continent of Australia. Means of communication were changing and evolving, the convict prison that had been Australia was being left behind by the flood of free settlers to the shores of this new country, and Aboriginal people, by and large, were sadly considered primitive and had failed (in the white man's view) to develop the resources of this continent (tragically, the 'White Australia' concept was also developing). A new, distinctive Australian character was emerging, and the seeds of a new nation were germinating. This was the fertile ground in which Churches of Christ was to be planted.

Cheek and Troy left Brisbane on their own (schoolteacher Thomas Geraghty was to meet them, but the evangelists had left the wharf before he got there), intending to return for a series of evangelistic meetings, and arrived at Zillman's Waterholes, where in Cheek's own words, they "devoted a week to the proclamation of the gospel of Christ, the result of which was that twelve became obedient to the faith."¹⁶ Cheek was also able to convert some members of a small Baptist church in the region to the Church of Christ cause and so, on 6 August 1882, "we beheld the first Church of Christ in Queensland... so far as we know."¹⁷ Cheek's manner came under criticism from some of the Baptist members, notably JW Lee, a deacon, who wrote to the 'Queensland Freeman' "to warn other small churches in Queensland against being caught and over-thrown in the same manner."¹⁸ Cheek refuted this accusation in 'the Brisbane Telegraph', and embarked on a spirited debate regarding the primacy of believer's baptism. The formation of the first Church of Christ in Queensland was not without controversy. After a few weeks, Cheek left Troy at Zillman's Waterholes, and continued on to preach – including at Lanefield, where he stayed with the Colvins. Two of the sons from Mrs Colvin's first marriage – Thomas and Frederick – would respectively go on to be well known in church work and international mission in the next generation of Churches of Christ in Queensland.

Cheek returned to Brisbane, which he commented was "noted for its apathy."¹⁹ The success that he had experienced at Zillman's Waterholes eluded him in the capital: "Our Brisbane meetings bore no apparent fruit."²⁰ This lack of initial success, added to the expensive nature of running meetings in the city, meant that the decision was made by Troy and Cheek to leave Brisbane and meetings were next held in Rosewood, which ultimately led to a church beginning there on 14 January 1883. Cheek recognised the task that lay ahead of them: "We have before us a large field.

A darkness broods over the colony, which only the Glorious gospel – proclaimed in its original simplicity, purity, and fullness, can dispel." He was, however, not daunted. "Yet, confident in the inherent power of the message we are privileged to bear, and cheered by the knowledge that we are upborne by the prayers of hundreds of loving hearts, we anticipate rich harvests of precious souls, for our Redeemer's kingdom and glory."²¹

JH Johnson's home patch at Toowoomba was then visited, and a small church was established there on 22 October 1882 in the local Temperance Hall, after 17 baptisms were held in the preceding weeks. Cheek wrote: "others previously immersed, have rallied to the New Testament principles, and a Church of Christ has been formed."²² Work was also begun nearby in Drayton and Middle Ridge. While on the surface all seemed smooth, Cheek and Troy both reported opposition in the area.

The last church that Cheek planted would be at Warwick. The 'Warwick Argus' announced that his first meeting was held on 15 November 1882 at the Protestant Hall.²³ The fruit of subsequent evangelistic meetings resulted in the Warwick church commencing on 14 January 1883 "despite some opposition"²⁴, which included Cheek having to respond to "jeering, and scoffing and insolent remarks"²⁵ while baptising in the Condamine River on 10 December 1882. Warwick, it appeared, was most likely to be Cheek's new base – he had settled accounts with his Victorian printer and had organised for subsequent publications to be printed in Warwick. From Warwick, Cheek then began to focus on Killarney, holding evangelistic meetings there. It was one such trip to Killarney that would prove his demise – after conducting a series of meetings at Killarney on the 12 and 13 February 1883 at the home of Mrs Hall²⁶, he began his return journey of 40 kilometres (by foot) to Warwick on St Valentine's Day.

While it may be tempting to look back on someone like Cheek as 'inexhaustible', that was far from the truth. Cheek's method of transportation was primarily his own two legs; he was often ill clothed and underfed, relying on the goodwill of strangers for shelter and food as he ministered from town to town. When he did receive funds, he used only what he needed and gave the rest away. He endured almost constant opposition, and ran local meetings with little external support. On 14 February 1883, Cheek was caught in a tropical storm while walking back to Warwick. In the darkness of the storm, he lost his way and spent the night in a deserted hut, soaked to the skin and unable to make a fire. The next day he made it to Warwick, where he retired to bed, fatigued and unwell.

JJ Haley in Melbourne received a telegram from FW Troy the next day, informing him that Cheek was "dangerously sick" with "typhoid fever".²⁷ It is unlikely that Cheek had typhoid fever – typhoid manifests over a period of days, and does not (usually) claim its victim so quickly. It is also unlikely that with end stage typhoid that Cheek could have walked from Killarney to Warwick. What is more likely is that Cheek had manifested symptoms of fever that to Troy's untrained eyes could have suggested typhoid. Cheek was no doubt over worked, under nourished, and as Hayley suggests, he was not a man of a strong constitution or robust health: "a man of... Cheek's constitution and laborious habits would not be able to withstand a severe attack of typhoid fever."²⁸ The week previously, Cheek had written a letter to Frederick Troy complaining of headaches, a loss of appetite and a general feeling of being unwell – and of being so exhausted that "to cut a slice of bread is quite an exertion."²⁹ This letter indicates a man who is deeply, deeply tired. Haley's fears regarding the inability of Cheek to fight off a serious illness proved true and, at 11am on 17 February 1883, the short but influential life of Stephen Cheek came to an end. His last recorded words were: "Let me go to my Master!"³⁰

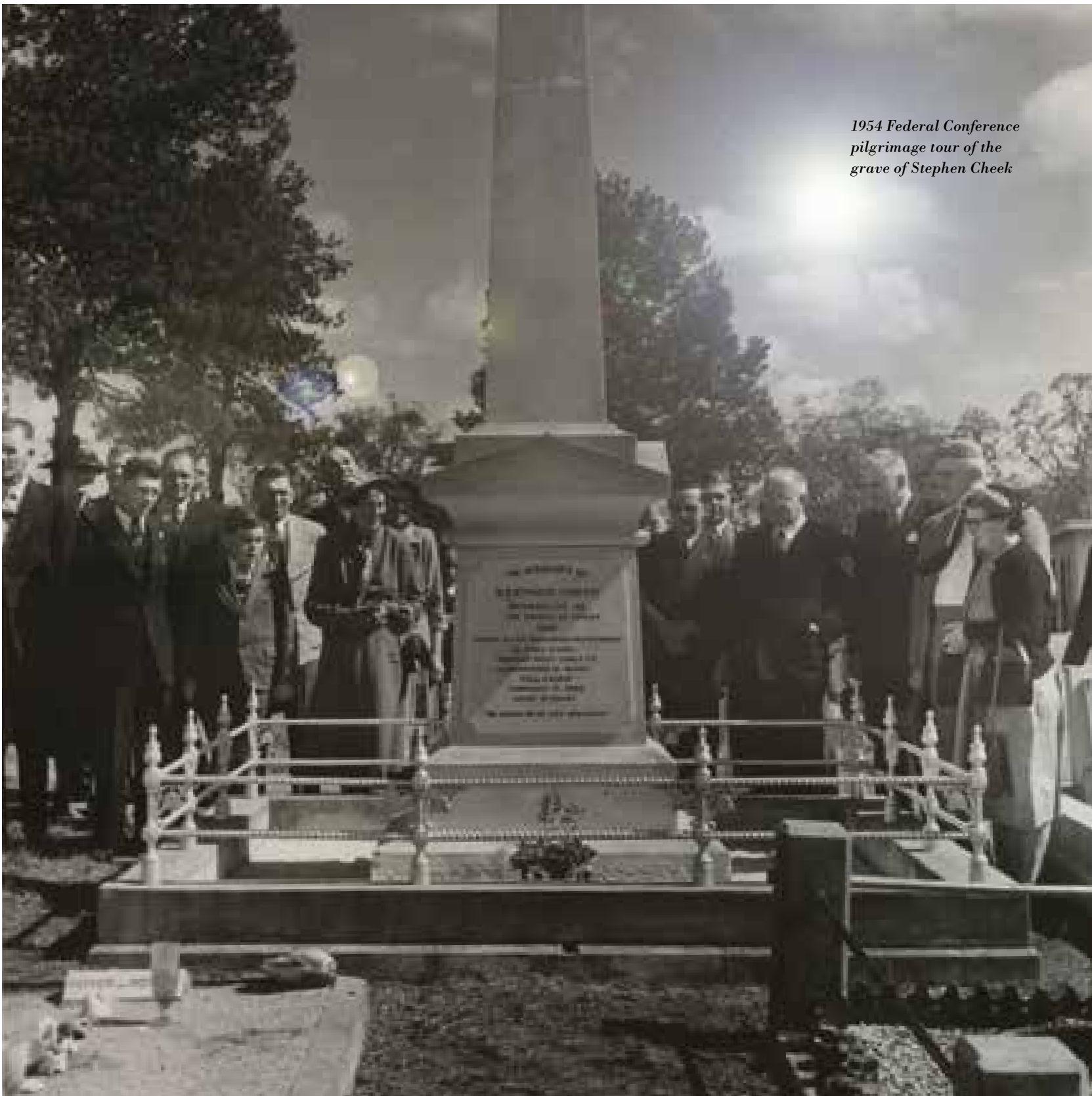
The character and legacy of Stephen Cheek

What kind of person was Stephen Cheek? From reading the written eulogy by JJ Haley on the death of Cheek, we can garner some contemporary understanding of Cheek as a person.

Haley, in his eulogy, speaks of Cheek's leadership abilities as a teacher, evangelist and church planter. He had the capacity to inspire confidence and draw people into mission with him. As a pastor/teacher, he had a capacity to bring a fresh approach in his teaching of the Bible. Cheek was an innovative user of visual aids to help him better communicate Bible teaching – in one Baptist church he was not allowed to use his visual aids as this, apparently, was not the proper thing to do! Haley writes:

*"His memory being remarkably retentive, and his devotion to the Bible supreme, his knowledge of that book was but little short of phenomenal. His familiarity with the Book of books was simply wonderful. It is not too much to say that he was a living encyclopaedia of biblical knowledge and a walking concordance combined in one... He was emphatically a man of the one book. He had read other books, and was a good observer of men and things, but the Bible was his chief study, and in this laid the secret of much of his power."*³¹





1954 Federal Conference pilgrimage tour of the grave of Stephen Cheek

What does Haley say about the character of Cheek? He writes:

*“He literally forsook all for Christ, and laying himself on the altar of consecration to his Divine Master... in labours prodigious and unremitting his time and strength were consumed, for which he neither desired nor expected fee or reward beyond food and raiment and a few shillings to take him to his next preaching appointment. If he received money beyond enough for the bare necessities of life, he devoted it to his work. If churches treated him handsomely in these matters he never boasted; if they treated him shabbily, as they often did, he never complained... He had not in his composition the slightest trace of self-conceit”.*³²

This, then, was the world and the person of Stephen Cheek. A world that is changing is often fertile soil for a movement – any political, social or religious movement. Churches of Christ flourished as a movement in its early years in Australia in part because of such soil. What faith would work for people in this emerging nation? Stephen Cheek became a leader for his time not just because of natural teaching abilities, but more so because of two eternal truths. One: who he was reflected the person of Christ. Two: he was passionate about the gospel of Christ and passionate for simple New Testament Christianity.

In our changing world of the twenty-first century, what is needed today are such people who reflect the life of Jesus and are passionate about the gospel. We need leaders whose character reflects the Christ they speak of, leaders who are sure of who they are in Christ, who are passionate about the gospel of Christ and desire to reach the generation and the culture they live amongst.

In the Warwick Cemetery there is a monument on Stephen Cheek’s grave. The following are the inscriptions on his monument:

In the Warwick Cemetery there is a monument on Stephen Cheek’s grave, with the following inscriptions:

ON THE EAST SIDE:

In Memory of Stephen Cheek, Evangelist of the Church of Christ, who, having as an honoured instrument in God’s hands brought many souls to a knowledge of Jesus, fell asleep 17 Feb, 1883. “He being dead, yet speaketh.”

ON THE WEST SIDE:

Erected in loving remembrance, by Christian Brethren in Australia and Tasmania.

ON THE NORTH SIDE:

“Go ye into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation. He that believeth and is baptised shall be saved; but he that disbelieveth shall be condemned.”

ON THE SOUTH SIDE:

Away from his home and the friends of his youth,
He hasted: the herald of mercy and truth,
For the love of the Lord, and to seek the lost;
And he fell like a soldier: he died at his post.