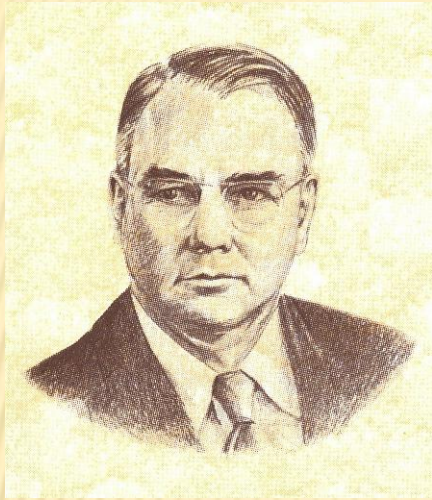


PAUL WESTPHAL THOMAS

Our Wesleyan History



MISSIONARY STATESMAN

By Lee Haines
Historian of The Wesleyan Church

Paul Westphal Thomas was born September 28, 1894, in Stockton, California, to James and Maria (Westphal) Thomas. His parents were serving in the Salvation Army and his father had been assigned official command of the Pacific Coast Division. James Thomas afterward was promoted to staff captain, with his commission bearing the signature of William Booth himself. The Thomas family later moved to Zion, Illinois, where Paul received his elementary education.

When Paul was about sixteen years of age, he sought relief from asthma by going west to Denver, Colorado. Here his mother had relatives, and here he attended high school. He hungered for more education; and when he heard that a student could work his way through Western Holiness College and Bible Training School in Colorado Springs, he enrolled there. The school was sponsored by the People's Mission Church, a small holiness denomination which had originated in the area.

On campus he found an extremely warm spiritual climate. There were special services at the downtown mission under the ministry of W. W. Hanks and Bona Fleming. Paul was deeply moved by one of Hanks's messages, and shortly afterward he was invited by William H. Lee, superintendent of the church, to go forward. He did, and was converted on January 14, 1912. That same year he was licensed to preach, and the following year he was entirely sanctified.

For a period of time, Paul was uncertain what he should do with his life. He

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returned to Illinois and drove a taxi for awhile in Chicago. Then on March 24, 1915, he reached a decision and made a firm commitment of his life to be invested in winning souls to Christ. He wrote out his commitment and sealed it in an envelope, not to be opened until his death – 57 years later. Then he went back to Colorado and threw himself into the work.

The next four years were busy ones. Paul W. Thomas continued his education at the Bible school and also at Barnes Business College in Denver. He pastored missions halls and carried on pioneer evangelism in the mountains. He served for a time as William Lee's secretary. Because he was physically disqualified for military service during World War I, he opened a mission hall at Junction City, Kansas, to minister to the soldiers at Fort Riley. In 1918 he was ordained. That same year he married Alice Howard of Paonia, Colorado, whom he had met at the Bible school. In 1919 William Lee died, and shortly afterward P.W. Thomas was elected superintendent at the age of 25.

Under Mr. Thomas, the tiny denomination prospered. The Bible school, which had been closed, was reopened as Colorado Springs Bible Training School. The ministry of James Taylor caused Thomas to become deeply concerned about missions, and at his own expense he visited Mexico and the West Indies. He became more and more convinced that a larger base was needed. Close fellowship had developed with the Pilgrim Holiness Church in Colorado and surrounding states. So in 1925, Thomas led the People's Mission Church to merger into the larger body. Then he served for the next few years as president of the Bible school in Colorado Springs.

In 1930, at the denominational General Assembly, the Pilgrim Holiness Church was faced with a need for drastic reorganization. P.W. Thomas and W. L. Surbrook were appointed to a special subcommittee of the polity committee to draft a plan. It was hammered out at night on Thomas's portable typewriter. The plan restructured the Church around a unified superintendency, a single General Board, and a centralized headquarters. It was adopted and proved to be the organizational turning point in the history of the Church.

Paul Westphal Thomas was a man of many gifts – evangelist, organizer, administrator, missionary statesman, writer, and editor. Those gifts were all given wholly to the Lord and used in the shaping of the Pilgrim Holiness Church for over half of its history.

Mr. Thomas was elected general secretary in 1930. It was still largely a session office, and he returned to Colorado to work in the school. But it was soon evident that a trained mind and a strong leader were needed in Indianapolis, Indiana, where the new headquarters was to be established. Thomas was invited to come to help out for a few weeks on an emergency basis, and he stayed there for 38 years!

During the four years that followed, he not only served as general secretary, but for two of those years he was also general treasurer and assistant editor. He served as personal secretary to General Superintendent Seth C. Rees, and much of the responsibility for the direction of foreign missions fell to him. In 1931 he wrote the first of the General Board policies for foreign missions; in it outlined a plan for a truly indigenous work, when such was a revolutionary concept. The annual November offerings for foreign missions were started that same year. Near the end of the quadrennial, bearing a commission from General Superintendent Walter L. Surbrook, Thomas made a trip to Africa to help open up a new mission work in Northern Rhodesia. To finance the trip he signed on board as purser, for which he received one dollar and his passage.

In 1934, the General Assembly created a new Department of Foreign Missions, and P.W. Thomas became the secretary of foreign missions, serving in the office until 1946. He made other trips to the fields, helping to start the work in the Philippines, where his son, Paul William Thomas, was later to play a major role. Great missionary rallies were held across the Church to enlist the support of the people. Missionaries who had operated largely on an independent basis were gradually brought within the guidelines of the policy. By 1938 far more efficient work was being done with only about two-thirds as many missionaries. From 1930 to 1938,

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fields had increased from eight to nine, Sunday school attendance had doubled and offerings by the nationals had increased sixfold.

In 1943, Mr. Thomas's first wife died. In 1945 he married again to Kathryn Bufkin of Pasadena, California.

From 1946 to 1962, Mr. Thomas served as general editor. During this period, cooperative publishing with the other holiness bodies was begun. In 1962, Olivet Nazarene College honored him with a Doctor of Divinity degree. From 1962 to 1966, he served as general superintendent. Both as editor and as superintendent, his missionary statesmanship continued to influence the church.

In 1966, at the age of 72, he stepped down from general office. But for the next two years, his "retirement" was delayed for a special project. For years he had been accumulating records, conference journals, and other documents. Now he gave himself to the writing of a manuscript later published in 1976, *The Days of Our Pilgrimage, the History of the Pilgrim Holiness Church*.

From 1968 to 1970 Dr. Thomas served as an evangelist, a work which he had carried on intensively through all the years of official service. In 1970 failing health finally forced retirement and the Thomases moved to California. On March 1, 1972, at Baywood, his earthly pilgrimage reached its destination, whose builder and maker is God.