

"The Union Heaven Gave Us:" The Doctrinal Practice of Christian Unity in the Church of God

Merle D. Strege
Anderson University
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Permit me to begin by thanking the Center for Christian Leadership for its gracious invitation to address the third annual Doctrinal Dialogue. Preparing this paper gave occasion to formally re-think a crucial aspect of the mission of the Church of God reformation movement. More than twenty-five years ago John W. V. Smith rightly described us as a people on a quest for holiness and unity, a phrase that captures the heart of the movement's mission. Early Church of God people fervently believed that God had called the movement into being to witness to the world of its need for salvation *and* to witness to the divided body of Christ for the crucial need of unity. Moreover, they saw this mission as two sides of one coin: to remove or diminish either was to render the accomplishment of its partner much more difficult. Unity without evangelism is to no purpose; evangelism without unity is highly problematic. So we are gathered here this afternoon to consider a matter of central importance to the history and on-going life of the Church of God. I am grateful for the opportunity to help us think about this central theological issue.

As everyone in the room is aware, the Church of God is a non-creedal tradition. Three implications of this statement deserve special emphasis. First, to say that we are non-creedal means not that we have no convictions but that we have "no creed but the Bible" and thus prefer to test doctrinal practice directly against the Scriptures. However, unless we are content to be a collection of ecclesiological cowboys this conviction commits the church to careful, communal biblical study. The Doctrinal Dialogue is one expression of this commitment. Second, that we are non-creedal does not necessarily

imply theological disagreement with the contents of Christendom's great doctrinal statements – the Apostles and the Nicene Creeds. Indeed, writers from C. E. Brown to Gilbert Stafford have observed that the Church of God does not teach or practice a doctrine alien to these statements. Third, our non-creedal position commits us to a practical approach to Christian doctrine; i. e. practice trumps belief statements. Thus the Bible is certainly a book to be believed, but even more it is to be performed, practiced, lived. Life is acting as well as being.

Within the theological perspective of the Church of God, a dialogue like this finally aims to address the questions, “What kind of people is God calling us to be? How are we to be and act in the world and toward Christendom as men and women of the Church of God as respects our practice of Christian unity?” In ecclesial traditions like the Church of God formal beliefs must be practiced, and the latter is the proof of the former. In a real sense, the practice is the doctrine. So we aim here at more than propositional understanding; we hope to form the church's practice. To gain a purchase on this task we must first attend to two formative influences on our common life. At the outset we must consider our narratives, consulting our ancestors' and contemporaries' ideas and practices about Christian unity. This is a consultation, not a search for preemptive or definitive statements. That would be to lend their work the kind of creedal stature that our forefathers and foremothers opposed. Rather, we will consult our formative narratives by respectfully listening to the living faith of the dead, and so let them cast a vote on answers to our question. Secondly, not in order of theological importance but only in sequence, we will consult some salient biblical texts. Concerning the topic of unity early Church of God preachers frequently resorted to John 17, and so will we. Lena Shofner's sermon on Ephesians 2:14-22 proved a memorable extension of the practice of

unity, and Galatians 3:28-29 is another oft-quoted text. What are the implications of these passages for the contemporary doctrinal practice of Christian unity in the Church of God? After working with the biblical text in light of our narratives hopefully we will finally come to a proposal for our own ecclesial life.

1. A Historical Overview of Theological Statements and Practice

1.1 The History of an Idea

It could be said of the Church of God reformation movement that it is an extended practice of the church. Historically, a particular vision of the church as one body has gripped our attention. Scratch the surface of many theological debates and you will find that what we are really discussing is the church. For example, although H. M. Riggle wrote several books attacking premillennialist eschatology the theological issue fundamentally at stake was the doctrine of the church. For if premillennialist interpretation of the Book of Revelation was correct then Riggle and other early church-historical interpreters were wrong; and if that was so, much if not all of what they taught about the church would necessarily be thrown into question. The doctrine of the church and, derivatively, Christian unity, is at the heart of the life and thought of the Church of God, and we can think of the movement as an extended discussion – sometimes a debate or even an argument – about what it means to be the church.

D. S. Warner (1842-1895) inaugurated a discussion and practice of the church that attempted to restore her to the model found in the New Testament. This is a form of Christian primitivism, a mindset that finds norms or patterns in the ancient Christian past and urges believers to restore or return to those norms. Other primitivist traditions include the Christian Churches and the early Friends, as illustrated in George Fox's slogan: "Primitive Christianity revived." Warner discussed his theology of the church in

a small pamphlet entitled, *The Church of God: What the Church of God is and What it is Not*. The booklet covers a range of topics, including the subjects of Christian unity and the problems associated with what Warner called “sectism.” Scholars in religion often use the term “sect” to refer to voluntary Christian bodies over against the established church, but Warner used the term in a much more pejorative sense. He defined sect from the Latin *sectare*, meaning “to cut,” and from which we get such English words as “section” or “dissect.” According to Warner all the churches of Christendom (in the United States they are called denominations) were nothing other than sects because they divide or cut up the body of Christ. However, the church must contain all the redeemed, and from this premise Warner concluded, “No sect contains all of the body of Christ, therefore no sect is the church of God. Then, as honest men, who expect to be judged by the Word of God, let us never call anything the church but the body of Christ; i. e., all the saved, either universally or in any given locality.”¹ That the sects were not the true church was also evidenced by their use of creeds, formal rules of membership, and bureaucratic forms of organization or “man-rule.” Warner asserted that the true church trusted only in the Bible, was comprised of all the saved, and was governed by Christ through the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

Warner’s theology of the church and his criticism of American Christianity’s denominational structure pressed him to a strong appeal for unity. Christ, the one head of the church, could have but one body even as her bridegroom could have but one bride.² Warner and other early preachers offered several New Testament texts in

¹ *The Church of God: What the Church of God is and What it is Not*, reprint edition, (Guthrie, Oklahoma: Faith Publishing House, n. d.), p. 1

² Early Church of God writers and preachers often employed the latter notion in a piece of rough and ready logic against a divided church: if denominations were each a church Christ would

support of this claim, but none was cited more frequently than Jesus' explicit plea for his disciples' unity in John 17. Galatians 3:28 declares that all are one in Christ, and Ephesians 2:14-22 refers to the collapse of the dividing wall of hostility through his work. But John 17 records Jesus' prayer for his disciples in the hours just before his Passion began. The moment's sheer drama would be enough to lend his words heightened significance, but the prayer also specifies the means by which Jesus' disciples will be united. Jesus prays here that his disciples and all who might believe through their witness "may be sanctified in truth . . . that they all may be one."³ Obviously, the union of all Christians could not be achieved through any form of bureaucratic organization. Warner concluded from John 17 that only through the work of the sanctifying Spirit could Christian unity be accomplished. The chorus of his gospel song "The Bond of Perfectness" expressed this insight in its chorus:

Oh brethren! How this perfect love
Unites us all in Jesus;
One heart and mind and soul we prove
The union heaven gave us.

The phrase "perfect love" is of course a synonym for Christian perfection, the experience of entire sanctification, or Christian holiness. In the late 1870s Warner had adopted this theology through his connection with the Holiness Movement, which emphasized entire sanctification as a second work of grace. Wesleyan soteriology thought of salvation as a "double cure." As Charles Wesley had written, Christ "breaks the power of canceled sin." On this view salvation comprised first of all *justification* – what God does in us – or the cancellation of sin, and secondly *sanctification* – what God

necessarily be the husband of more than one bride. The suggestion of a morally compromised Christ as bigamist or worse was offered as proof positive that multiple churches or denominations could not possibly be the true church.

³ John 17:17-21, *passim*

does in us – namely breaking sin’s hold over the believer. Camp meeting revivalism was the natural home of holiness preachers, and in that context the instantaneous reception of sanctification after justification became the standard view. To this view Warner was no exception. However, to use his phrase, “Bible salvation” brought more than freedom from sin. It also bound the redeemed and sanctified together in all-sufficient love.

Warner thus articulated an experience of harmony often the subject of testimonies from those who attended holiness camp meetings even before 1880. The experience of unity to which they testified Warner explained theologically and became a fundamental rallying point for the little group gathered about the *Gospel Trumpet*. No creeds, rules of fellowship, or other artificial tests were required among those who lived on the plane of Bible holiness. As the true foundation of Christian unity, in Warner’s ecclesiology holiness yielded a pervasive harmony in fellowship, worship, and ethical life; the early Church of God attempted to practice this understanding of the true church.

Through the Church of God movement’s first fifty years the message of Christian unity through the sanctification of believers remained fairly constant. H. M. Riggle’s work *The Christian Church, Its Rise and Progress*⁴ illustrates this consistency. Riggle (1872-1952) explicitly extended the primitivist conception of the church implicit in Warner’s earlier work. However, during the years between Warner’s pamphlet and Riggle’s book the church-historical interpretation of biblical apocalyptic writing had emerged first in the work of W. G. Schell and later with F. G. Smith.⁵ The full title of Schell’s work illustrates the connection to ecclesiology established by church-historical exegetes: *The*

⁴ (Anderson: The Gospel Trumpet Company, 1913)

⁵ W. G. Schell, *The Biblical Trace of the Church* (Grand Junction: Gospel Trumpet Publishing Company, 1893); F. G. Smith, *The Revelation Explained*, (Anderson: Gospel Trumpet Company, 1908).

Biblical Trace of the Church, from her Birth to the End of Time: Showing the Origin and Termination of Sectism and Proving We are Near the End of the World. Riggle himself had helped to establish this connection, having edited and completed Warner's unfinished typological reading of Daniel and the Revelation, *The Cleansing of the Sanctuary*.⁶ Thus he opened his study of the church with this description:

As we stand on the summit of the present truth and point our telescope back over the mists and clouds that move along at our feet, and over the twelve hundred and sixty years of utter darkness that extend far beyond, even into the third century, we behold, on the mountains of God's own holiness, the temple of God, resplendent with the morning light of his own glory. With admiration we view her' and behold, she is 'fair as the moon, clear as the sun, and terrible as an army with banners.' She is 'all fair,' the city of the great king. That golden city is *the primitive church*.⁷

Riggle's explicit primitivism meant that the "golden city" of the ancient New Testament church provided the standard by which the authenticity of all subsequent churches was to be assessed. Among the distinguishing criteria of the New Testament church were oneness and unity. Riggle repeated the logic that required one body for the church's one head – Christ. Never one to mince words, Riggle sharpened the rhetoric used to describe "the sects," asserting that the call to join one of these various bodies "must proceed from antichrist."⁸

As the primitive church, so also the latter-day restored church must exhibit a complete unity that replicated the New Testament model. Accordingly, the saved members of this church must (1) not be of this world but shun its "popular amusements and abominations; (2) abide in Christ alone and refuse to join any human substitute for the church; (3) take for themselves the only New Testament name for the church and

⁶ (Moundsville: Gospel Trumpet Publishing Company, 1903)

⁷ Riggle, *loc cit.*, p. 33; Riggle's emphasis

⁸ *ibid.*, p. 44

abjure any and all modifiers; (4) accept the one and only proper discipline for the church, the Bible; and (5) be sanctified, for “sanctifying grace removes all carnality, which is the cause of division, and the all-pervading love of God, shed abroad in the heart by the Holy Spirit, brings all hearts into the same harmony that reigns in heaven, into perfect unity, as the Father and Son are one.”⁹

H. M. Riggle and the second generation of Church of God leadership generally repeated Warner’s connection between holiness and unity. However, it must also be stated that the church-historical exegesis sharpened these themes and gave them a harder edge. To name some Christians daughters of Babylon the great harlot lent new force to the call to come out of sectism. In point of fact, ever since Warner Church of God people had been urging believers to quit the false churches of the denominations and enter the true New Testament body of Christ. Nevertheless, the apocalyptically grounded self-understanding of Schell, Smith, the early Riggle and those they influenced deepened the gulf separating the Church of God from other believers. If the essence of the sectarian mentality is to refuse legitimacy to any other groups, then, despite protestations to the contrary the Church of God shaped by the church-historical exegesis threatened to make of itself the very thing it had originally opposed. Thus by the decade of the 1920s the Church of God may very well have been more isolated from other Christians than at any other moment in its history.

Not all members of the Church of God subscribed to the apocalyptically grounded view of the church. During the decade of the Twenties opponents of this view began to express themselves in published statements and sermons. In their view the church-historical exegesis and insistence that others “come out of Babylon” was closing

⁹ *ibid.*, p. 69-84, quotation, p. 84

the movement off from fellowship with other believers. Even before 1920 George P. Tasker challenged Smith's apocalypticism and practiced a Christian unity that took him into YMCA lecture halls and Presbyterian pulpits in Lahore, India, where Tasker served as a missionary of the Church of God. By the end of the decade, E. A. Reardon and Russell Byrum had publicly repudiated the narrow sectarianism into which they believed the Church of God was descending. The details of their opposition are too well known to rehearse here in detail.¹⁰ Reardon was voted off many of his board assignments. Tasker was deprived of his missionary appointment; Byrum resigned his faculty position. These developments illustrate the intellectual honesty of the three as well as the strength of the apocalyptic mindset's influence on much of the Church of God ministry.

Into this highly charged atmosphere stepped Charles E. Brown (1883-1971), newly ratified as Editor in Chief of the Gospel Trumpet Company in 1930. While many knew his reputation as a thinking minister, few could have predicted the ecclesiological revolution that flowed from this man's prolific typewriter. Brown possessed a knowledge of Christian history more comprehensive than any of his predecessors or contemporaries, and this broad knowledge served as a basis by which Brown assessed the life and thought of Christians in other times and places. This historical awareness and knowledge also steered him away from the apocalypticism of the preceding Editor, F. G. Smith. At the same time these intellectual characteristics moved Brown toward

¹⁰ For an extended discussion see Robert H. Reardon, *The Early Morning Light*, (Anderson: Warner Press, 1979) and my *I Saw the Church*, (Anderson: Warner Press, 2002), especially chapter 9, "Challenging the Apocalyptic Identity." Cf. also excerpts from E. A. Reardon's 1929 Anderson Camp Meeting sermon in Barry L. Callen, ed., *Following the Light*, (Anderson: Warner Press, pp. 134-136; see also Russell Byrum's 1929 paper read to the Indiana State Ministers' Meeting, *ibid.*, pp. 127-133.

embracing what he termed, in one of his books, *A New Approach to Christian Unity*.¹¹ Within a year of succeeding Smith, Brown had developed a new position on Christian unity even as he perpetuated some of the previous generation's ideals. On one hand Brown continued the earlier judgment that divisions within Christianity constituted both a problem and a reproach on those content to live in disunity. In so doing he also disputed a widespread notion that Christians enjoyed a spiritual unity that transcended denominational walls. Spiritual unity was important, wrote Brown, but in addition to this Christ also prayed for "organic unity."¹² Like Warner, Riggle, and Smith, Brown also took the primitive church of the New Testament as the standard for contemporary church life. Eschewing apocalyptic language, however, he preferred to describe ideal Christian life and thought as "radical" in the sense of getting to the root of the matter. While he agreed that the post New Testament church has lost its radical nature and pursued ineffective means of unity, Brown did not reach that conclusion by employing church-historical exegesis. He remained consistent with the ideals of earlier Church of God primitivism however his proposal for a return to the unity of the New Testament church departed from earlier discussions.

Brown believed that the apostolic church enjoyed a profound unity and that it was incumbent on the contemporary church to recover that relationship. He proposed three steps to this recovery in a program he labeled "spiritual disarmament." The first step was to "drop all official creeds insofar as they are official and authoritative definitions of denominational belief."¹³ By this recommendation Brown was not demonizing creeds or those who use them. Quite the contrary, he regarded creeds as

¹¹ (Anderson: The Warner Press, 1931)

¹² *ibid.*, p. 27

¹³ *ibid.*, p. 149

useful for theological students and any reasonably founded belief in a creed unobjectionable. Nevertheless, he also appreciated the divisive role that creeds have played in separating Christians.¹⁴ Such divisiveness is a characteristic that he applied to unwritten creeds as well. Written or unwritten, Brown regarded as a pernicious evil creeds that exclude some faithful Christians from the fellowship of other believers. However, ideally speaking an unwritten creed possesses the virtue of a vitality that renders it “capable of responding to the divine guidance of the living Christ in the church. It can broaden with the increase of knowledge.”¹⁵

Brown’s second step to the recovery of New Testament unity was the abolition of all formal denominational structures. He proposed not merger but abolition. Here we see at work Brown’s appreciation for radical Christianity. He reminded his readers that in the long view of Christian history denominations were a fairly recent phenomenon, and in what today may be considered a moment of astute prescience Brown declared, “All signs point to their eventual abolition and the gathering of God’s people once again into the blessed peace and unity of the ancient church.”¹⁶ It should be noted that Brown saw in most denominations positive qualities that they would contribute to this church beyond division: Quaker “inner light,” Baptist democracy, Presbyterian fidelity to the truth, and Methodist evangelistic fervor.

¹⁴ *ibid.* One of Brown’s favorite examples of the divisive effects of creeds was the *filioque* controversy that played an instrumental role in opening a ninth century doctrinal schism that contributed to the eventual division of Christendom into the Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic churches in 1054.

¹⁵ *ibid.*, p. 151

¹⁶ *ibid.*, p. 163

Third and most important, Christians of today can recover their lost visible unity only by committing themselves to Christ, the Lord of the church. Here Brown gave expression to the Pietist heritage of the Church of God:

Doctrine is very important; but more important it is to get back to the supreme Person, who is the source of all true doctrine. He has said, "I am the WAY, the TRUTH, and the LIFE." When all Christendom gets back to him it will be one. There will be plenty of time to compare and study doctrines, when the clamor of debate has given place to the silence of the humble and earnest pupils in the school of Christ.¹⁷

Ultimately the unity of the church rests not on loyalty to a creed, nor even to a book, but to a Person. From this position Brown concluded that all who are saved in Christ are already members of the body of Christ regardless their denominational affiliation. This view could not but legitimize any church where faithful disciples were found. Once such legitimacy was granted, the sectarian posture and mindset of the Church of God movement had to begin eroding. No longer could the movement be so determined in its withdrawal to the isolation from which it called others to come out of Babylon. The view that all who are saved in Christ are members of the church of God is thus a crucial step in the development of the movement's doctrinal practice of Christian unity. More than any other single voice, it was C. E. Brown who articulated the ecclesiology and vision of unity that permitted, even encouraged the Church of God to cross denominational borders formerly regarded as sealed. By the early 1940s a growing number of ministers were critical of "come-outism," contending that functionally it underwrote the unity only of the movement and not all Christians.¹⁸

1.2 The History of a Doctrinal Practice

¹⁷ *ibid.*, p. 170

¹⁸ The views of some of these ministers are reported in Robert H. Reardon's unpublished S. T. M. thesis, Oberlin Graduate School of Theology, 1943.

Earlier I stated that for non-creedal groups like the Church of God doctrine is better conceived as a set of practices than a collection of propositions or a belief statement.¹⁹ One may conveniently refer to published theological statements as a way of getting a handle on “doctrine,” but even more important is it to ask, “How were Church of God people *practicing* the church and, specifically, Christian unity?” I have already identified “come-outism” as a pervasive doctrinal practice of unity in the Church of God in the years before 1930. What other versions, if any, of Christian unity were also in practice?

The twentieth century was the great age of ecumenism. The Federal Council of Churches was founded in America in 1908 and the World Council of Churches in 1948. Church of God people were either aware of or attended each of the latter’s two great precursors. In 1925 C. J. Blewitt of the New York missionary home attended the Universal Christian Conference on Life and Work in Stockholm, Sweden. Blewitt approvingly described “so many great men and women showing such humility and earnestly seeking to get the world to understand the meaning of love in domestic and public relations.”²⁰ Two years later the other parent of the World Council of Churches, the World Conference on Faith and Order, convened in Lausanne, Switzerland. The Church of God sent no official observers to this meeting, but R. L. Berry, Managing Editor of the *Gospel Trumpet* kept a watchful eye on its proceedings. More skeptical than Blewitt, Berry expected the conference to fail because it pursued what he supposed to be the path of federated unity. He concluded that the devil would likely be in attendance. However, Berry added, “But God will also be there if any of his people are, and we

¹⁹ I tried to establish this position in *I Saw the Church*, pp. x-xiv. For supportive viewpoints see James W. McClendon, Jr. *Systematic Theology*, Vol. I, *Ethics*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1986), Dorothy Bass, *Practicing Our Faith*, (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997), and Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 2nd edition, (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), p. 187.

²⁰ *Gospel Trumpet*, September 24, 1925, pp. 4-5

cannot doubt that. So we believe God will be there to inspire his people to real unity such as the Bible demands and inspires."²¹

Even before Blewitt and Berry offered their observations about world ecumenism Church of God folk had joined cooperative Christian ventures in the United States. In 1918 the Missionary Board affiliated with the Foreign Missions Conference. Shortly afterward the Board of Christian Education and the Gospel Trumpet Company adopted the use of International Sunday School Outlines for the preparation of Church of God curriculum. Christian educators reached across conventional lines more than others. In 1928 they joined the International Council of Christian Education; a few years later they joined the World Council of Christian Education as well as committees responsible for the preparation of Sunday school lesson outlines.

As a body the Church of God did not join the American Council of Churches or its successor, the National Council. However, individuals from the Church of God have participated with or served as members of individual program units. The first Executive Secretary of the Executive Council, C. W. Hatch, was a longstanding member of the Federal Council's Commission on Stewardship, serving as chairperson for a term. Otto F. Linn joined a sub-committee working on the National Council's translation project, *The Revised Standard Version* of the Bible. Church of God youth programs, the women's organization, and the Board of Church Extension associated with cooperative Christian ventures reaching back as early as 1930. Perhaps the most striking example of commitment to an ecumenical approach to Christian unity has been the movement's membership on the Commission on Faith and Order of the National Council. Through the participation of John W. V. Smith and Gilbert Stafford the Church of God has

²¹ *Gospel Trumpet*, July 14, 1927, inside front cover.

enjoyed uninterrupted membership in Faith and Order since its inception in 1957. Stafford in particular has proved an eloquent and longstanding spokesperson for Christian unity. Never an advocate of merger or formalized unions, he has exemplified the dialogical approach to Christian unity characteristic of the American conciliar movement.²² These examples illustrate that at least one alternate practice of unity was alive and well simultaneously with the apocalyptic mindset's "come-outism."

More recently, under the auspices of the former Executive Council and now the Ministries Council, people of the Church of God have engaged in bi- or multi-lateral conversations with representatives of other Christian communions. In the 1960s the movement entered into a series of discussions with representatives from the Churches of God of North America, the Church of the Brethren and the Brethren Church. In 1968 the Church of God joined the Evangelical Covenant Church in a similar series of bi-lateral discussions. Although feared by some, formal church unions were never the goal of any of these conversations. They were advanced in the warm ecumenical atmosphere that enveloped American Christianity during that decade and were committed simply to an honest search for points of commonality.²³

The spirit of honest searching has also characterized the longest running bi-lateral conversation, a series of meetings with the Independent Christian Churches/Churches of Christ beginning in 1989. In a forum held that year at Trader's Point Christian Church at Indianapolis, representatives of both groups met to discuss theological topics ranging

²² In this connection see the volume recently edited by Stafford, Ted A. Campbell and Ann K. Riggs, *Ancient Faith and American Born Churches: Dialogues Between Christian Traditions*, Faith and Order Commission Theological Series, (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2006). Stafford's dialogues with Catholic and Orthodox scholars on holiness and worship, respectively, illumine what is described as a dialogical approach.

²³ For a summary of these conversations see *Christian Unity and Ecumenical Trends*, (Anderson: Executive Council of the Church of God, n. d.).

from history and theology to church practice and the ordinances. Participants from both groups recognized a great many points of commonality, and there has ensued a series of occasional meetings the most recent of which occurred only this last spring. The enduring discussion topic of these meetings has been, "In what ways can these two movements join in common work for the advancement of the kingdom of God on earth?"²⁴

In conversations bi-lateral or quadrilateral, in associations with cooperative Christian ventures to assist and enrich the ongoing life of the church, and in the memberships of boards or individuals in program units of ecumenical bodies, people of the Church of God have practiced forms of Christian unity alternative to the isolationist posture of the apocalyptic self-understanding. These alternate practices have not gone un-noticed or without occasional rebuke. In 1985 the General Assembly adopted a resolution encouraging efforts "to seek intentional interchurch relationships through which its own ministries are enriched and which provide opportunity for the Church of God reformation movement to live out its message of Christian unity through enriching the entire Body of Christ."²⁵ However, in 1987 both the National and World Councils of Churches received stinging criticism from the floor of the Assembly, and questions were raised concerning the propriety of agency membership in program units of either body. At the same time, former Executive-Secretaries Paul Tanner and Edward Foggs have served in leadership positions within the National Association of Evangelicals without strong vocal criticism, all of which serves to illustrate the diversity of the movement's

²⁴ The question is quoted from a comprehensive summary of this conversation through 1997, Barry Callen and James North, *Coming Together in Christ*, (Joplin, Missouri: College Press Publishing Company, 1997).

²⁵ Callen, ed., *Following the Light*, p. 187

practice of unity. In this connection it is perhaps worth noting the fate of the Commission on Christian Unity, a program unit within the movement that was born in the midst of this diverse practice. It took the Church of God some eighty-four years to officially create this commission whose purpose was the advancement of one of the movement's cardinal doctrines. Scarcely more than a generation later the General Assembly overwhelmingly adopted a restructuring plan that called for the elimination of all divisions and commissions – including the Commission on Christian Unity.

The apocalyptic self-understanding's come-outism and what might be broadly termed the practice of ecumenical cooperation share an important feature. Although widely variant practices, both think of Christian unity in theological terms; both approach the subject ecclesialogically: Christian unity so conceived addresses the topic as the problem of Christians who are separated individually and by group. In the 1970s and '80s new voices in the movement raised questions about the nature of Christian unity that were constructed in very different terms.

Given the strident call for the racial integration of American society in the 1950s and '60s it was unavoidable that African-American clergy would raise questions concerning the practice of Christian unity. They cast the movement's earlier rhetoric in a new light. Where Galatians 3:28 had once been quoted to reinforce a call to *church* unity, now the same text was applied to the racism that divided even a movement that historically had declared unity to be its reason for being. In 1970 the Caucus of Black Churchmen in the Church of God met in Cleveland, Ohio to “share the burden of the Black church and to share the concerns it feels under God to be imperative if the church is to be the salt of the

earth.”²⁶ The Caucus exposed a raw wound in that part of the body of Christ known as the Church of God. The ministers gathered in Cleveland asserted that racism was an ugly fact calling into question the movement’s commitment to Christian unity.

No person challenged racism more than the late Samuel G. Hines, long term pastor of Third Street Church of God in Washington, D. C. Hines was fond of saying that the Church of God deserved an “A” for its message of unity, but an “F” for its practice. He and the Rev. Louis Evans, pastor of National Presbyterian Church, overcame this tendency by forging a friendship that brought their two congregations into close bonds of Christian fellowship. Hines understood doctrine to be a set of practices that must be lived out in the church’s life. If the Church of God was to faithfully live out its call as a movement of Christian unity racial reconciliation had to be more than a claim; it had to be at the heart of the movement’s doctrinal practice.

Hines’ theological and pastoral legacy has been extended at Third Street church by Cheryl Sanders, also a professor at Howard University. Sanders has pointedly connected the issue of racial reconciliation to what she calls an ethic of holiness and unity. In an essay contributed to an anthology titled *Called to Ministry, Empowered to Serve*²⁷ she developed a foundation for Church of God ethics on which she built a connection between sanctification and social change. In Sanders’ view the call to holiness necessarily involves the dismantling of division based on race or sex.²⁸ The movement’s traditional theological theme that holiness brings unity was thus applied to aspects of the movement’s internal life; Christian unity was no longer a matter concerning the

²⁶ *The Church of God in Black Perspective* (n. p., n. d.), i

²⁷ “Ethics of Holiness and Unity in the Church of God” in Juanita Evans Leonard, ed., *Called to Ministry, Empowered to Serve: Women in Ministry*, (Anderson: Warner Press, 1989)

²⁸ *ibid.*, p. 145

many churches. By the 1980s people in the Church of God were increasingly reflecting on the practice of unity *within* the movement as social and theological fissures either were exposed or opened wide enough so as not to be ignored. What had begun as a criticism and concern for a divided Christendom also became an instrument for self-examination and critique.²⁹

2.0 Consulting Scripture on the Topic of Unity

H. M. Riggle believed that no sincere Christian could ignore or otherwise set aside Jesus' prayer in John 17. A scriptural consideration of Christian unity appropriately begins with and rests upon the text to which Church of God preachers and writers have referred so often in the course of 125 years.

Jesus' prayer for his disciples is part of a lengthy section of John's gospel beginning at chapter 13 and focused around the Last Supper. Jesus has already washed the feet of his disciples, shared the meal with them and identified Judas as his betrayer. Chapters 14 through 16 comprise a lengthy discourse followed by 17:1, "These things Jesus spoke; and lifting his eyes to heaven he said . . ." For our purposes the relevant verses are vv.

16-21:

They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world. Sanctify them in the truth; Thy word is truth. As Thou didst send Me into the world, I have also sent them into the world. And for their sakes I sanctify Myself, that they may also be sanctified in truth. I do not ask in behalf of these alone, but for those also who believe in Me through their word; that they all may be one; even as Thou, Father, *art* in Me, and I in Thee, that they also may be in Us; that the world may believe that Thou didst send me. (NASB)

²⁹ In response to issues raised by the Anderson College controversy in 1980, the Board of Directors of the Executive Council convened two dialogues in 1981 under the theme of "internal unity." The first dialogue (January) considered biblical, structural and relationship issues. The second (December) discussed leadership development in higher education, the priesthood of believers, and movement stances on world affairs. Cf. Barry L. Callen, ed., *Following the Light*, pp. 291-295

Three elements and their interrelationship in this text are noteworthy. Jesus prays for the *sanctification* of his followers, their *unity*, and the *fruitful evangelism* of the world.

Neither the disciples' unity nor holiness is an end in itself, nor is it likely that the world will recognize Jesus as God's Christ in the face of a divided body of believers. Holiness leads to unity and unity encourages the world's belief in Jesus. How are we to interpret this text so simple and yet so profoundly demanding of the church?

To be holy is to be sanctified. The Greek *hagiazō*, "sanctify," carries the dual understanding either of being purified or being set apart. Ben Witherington opts for the latter interpretation, citing Jer. 1:5 and Exod. 28:41 as precedents: "The disciples are to be set aside in the truth, just as Jesus sets himself apart, or consecrates himself in the truth."³⁰ Otto F. Linn concurs, "Holiness is not always thought of as the opposite of impurity, but often, as here, it is a dedication to a sacred purpose over against the common use of life for selfish ends. . . . Holiness in this sense demands an inward conformity of heart and will to the will and purpose of God."³¹ On the other hand, Rudolf Bultmann does not think that purity is a notion to be ruled out of the interpretation of this text and in fact makes it central to the dynamic separating church and world:

If it is true that the existence of the community depends upon maintaining its purity, i. e. on receiving and preserving its *raison d'être* and nature not from the world but from beyond it, then unity is an essential part of that nature. Accordingly the prayer for the oneness of the community is joined to the prayer for the preservation of purity . . ."³²

³⁰ Ben Witherington, III, *John's Wisdom: A Commentary on the Fourth Gospel*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), p. 270

³¹ Otto F. Linn, *The Gospel of John*, (Anderson: The Gospel Trumpet Company, 1942), p. 133

³² Rudolf Bultmann, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, trans. by G. R. Beasley-Murray, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1971), p. 503

Purity here is not to be narrowly defined with the holiness codes of nineteenth and early twentieth century American Protestantism. Rather, to be holy in the sense Bultmann takes is to be marked off from the world, which we may take in John for a symbol for anything that refuses to acknowledge Yahweh and his way. Such a view aligns with the idea of sanctification as separation. To be set apart for the service of God, to be conformed to the will and purpose of God, is to be set over against the world and thus, in Bultmann's sense, to be pure.

Sanctification in the word of truth is the means by which the disciples will be made one. They are made one through their sanctification by God. The church is joined to Christ and through their sanctification share Christ's complete devotion to the world's redemption. Thus the union of the church rests in its union with Christ and Christ with God.³³ The implications of this unity are world-annulling and commit the church to a counter-cultural way of life. Commenting on John 17 more than a decade before *Brown v. Board of Education* Otto Linn wrote, "There can be no racial, social, economic, or intellectual differences great enough to justify separation between those who have experienced the unity of the divine life through faith in Christ."³⁴

Commentators agree that the unity of the church is the work of God and not the product of their own making. Several also agree that the rejection of creeds and other human institutions is not *ipso facto* grounds for unity. It cannot be achieved either through the use or rejection of creeds or other human inventions:

But such unity has the unity of the Father and Son as its basis. Jesus is the Revealer by reason of this unity of Father and Son; and the oneness of the community is to be based on this fact. That means it is not founded on natural or purely historical data; nor can it be manufactured by organisation, institutions,

³³ Linn, *loc cit.*, p. 134; Witherington, *loc cit.*, pp. 270-271

³⁴ Linn, *ibid*

dogma; these can at best only bear witness to the real unity, as on the other hand they can also give a false impression of unity. And even if the proclamation of the word in the world requires institutions and dogmas, these cannot guarantee the unity of true proclamation. On the other hand, the actual disunion of the church, which is, in passing, precisely the result of its institutions and dogmas, does not necessarily frustrate the unity of the proclamation. The word can resound authentically, wherever the tradition is maintained.³⁵

The word may resound authentically, but the disciples' unity renders its proclamation more effective. According to John 17:21 it is through the disciples' unity that the world will know that God sent Christ into the world. Such unity may be evidenced through the fellowship of worship and/or service. In the hour of prayer differences melt before God. Christians joining together on Habitat for Humanity construction sites and in cooperation for disaster relief projects from Hurricane Katrina to the Indian Ocean tsunami manifest the church's unity. Such moments are crucial to the church's witness to the world, for in them the world is made aware that it is the world and not the church. None other than one of the favorite whipping boys of the Church of God, John Calvin, saw this connection:

[John] again lays down the end of our happiness as consisting in unity, and justly; for the ruin of the human race is, that, having been alienated from God, it is also broken and scattered in itself. The restoration of it, therefore, on the contrary, consists in its being properly united in one body, as Paul declares the perfection of the Church to consist in *believers joined together in one spirit* . . .

Wherefore, whenever Christ speaks about unity, let us remember how basely and shockingly, when separated from him, the world is scattered; and, next, let us learn that the commencement of a blessed life is, that we all be governed, and that we all live, by the Spirit of Christ alone.³⁶

The church is sanctified through the word of truth, in John's gospel Christ, and made one with him and the Father. This unity transcends and overcomes all of the categories and differences the world customarily uses to rank and divide people and by which we

³⁵ Bultmann, *loc cit*, p. 513

³⁶ John Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, vol. II, trans. by William Pringle, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmanns Publishing Company, 1949), p. 183

often polarize ourselves. Paul's declaration, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female" (Gal. 3:28a, NASB) does not describe a church built on mutual respect for fundamental differences or an agreement to disagree. No, "You are all one in Christ Jesus." (3:28b, NASB). We are not all alike but that is not the issue, for uniformity is not Christian unity. "It is not personal sympathies or common aims that constitute the unity, but the word that is alive in them all and that gives the community its foundation; and each member represents the demand and gift of the word over against his fellow believer, in that he is for him."³⁷

3.0 The Church as the Restoration of Babel

In some senses discussions of Christian unity today may seem a joke. Denominational loyalty in the United States is declining rapidly, and although most precipitous among mainline Protestant groups, this decline is experienced by Evangelicals and other conservative bodies as well. Religious special interest groups compete with established traditions for the time and dollars of faithful disciples of Jesus. Alternatives to conventional denominational affiliation such as the new monasticism and the emergent church also are attracting the attention of earnest Christians. Even more broadly, the growing preference for spirituality over against religion, where religion is often misunderstood as church rules and regulations, also poses serious questions for the future of conventional church life in the United States.³⁸ In the face of so many alternatives, why do we bother to continue discussing this particular topic?

³⁷ Bultmann, *loc cit.*, p. 513

³⁸ Researcher George Barna predicts that by 2025 no more than 30-35% of Americans will experience and/or express their faith through affiliation with a local church, a figure which, if it comes to pass will be down from 70% in 2000. Cf. *Revolution*, (Carol Stream, Ill.: Tyndale House Publishers, 2005), p. 49

The simplest answer to this question is that we aim to be conformed to Scripture. The New Testament cannot envision Christian faith and discipleship apart from the church. The church is, as Cyprian declared, the sole ark of salvation at least in the sense that all the redeemed are her passengers, but also because our characters are in the process of being made whole as we are joined to our brothers and sisters in Christ. Most of them are not much like us, and thank God for that. The church is a company of strangers, rightly described by Bill and Gloria Gaither as a family. Unlike friends, we do not get to choose our family members; we are stuck with them, but because blood is thicker than water we find a way to go on. So also we do not get to choose the membership of the church; all of us are thrown in with each other but here too blood is thicker than water – only it is not our own blood that joins us. Cyprian may not have meant it precisely in this way, but since the church is crucial to the moral formation of individual Christians, *extra ecclesiam nulla salus*, “there is no salvation outside the church.” The continuing doctrinal practice of Christian unity is part of the lifeblood of any individual congregation, denomination or movement, and, because the New Testament envisions cooperation among far-flung congregations and different cultures, ultimately the ideal for all who take the name of Christ. Speaking parochially for we of the Church of God, unless we believe God has released us from our original reason for being we have no choice but to continue thinking, talking, and practicing Christian unity.

Viewed through the lens of church-historical exegesis, the terms “Babel” and “Babylon” held powerful symbolic value in the Church of God. The former was taken to refer to religious confusion, from the linguistic confusion sown among Nimrod and his subjects. The latter was taken as a symbol of the confusion of competing and

contradictory denominational voices. Religious confusion would eventually be overcome “as the evening light doth shine.” In closing I want to suggest that the church remains the answer to the problem of confusion and disunity, but that Babel and Babylon should be interpreted more broadly.

The story of the Tower of Babel is an aetiological narrative that explains the emergence of different languages and ultimately people groups. Linguistic and cultural barriers with their resultant misunderstandings and tension have ever since threatened the possibility of peace among the peoples of the world. Babel is a problem, but it is larger than religious division and confusion. Historical critical scholars like Otto Linn take Babylon in Revelation more commonly to refer to the Roman Empire than to denominations or Roman Catholicism, and I follow their lead. Rome boasted that she was the “Eternal City,” but Christians believed otherwise. In this sense, Babylon is an apocalyptic symbol that refers to any worldly powers of sufficient arrogance and self-absorption to usurp the place of God. Such empires have troubled the people of God from the Assyrians to Babylonians to Persians to the Selucids to Romans, etc. Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann has noted the threat that empire poses for the people of God.³⁹ The books of Daniel and Isaiah both address the empire’s invitation to settle down and become comfortably domesticated and accept an empire that is not and cannot ever be home. Thus in Brueggemann’s view, the church, like the Israelites living in Babylon must decide between accommodating to the culture and continuing to understand that they are exiles. “‘Exile’ is not simply a geographical fact, but also a

³⁹ cf. *Hopeful Imagination: Prophetic Voices in Exile*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), esp. pp. 89-130

theological decision."⁴⁰ Like Babel, therefore, "Babylon" also remains a problem but its scope is larger than divided Christendom.

Acts 2 narrates the story of Pentecost, which is not the revival of the church but the account of its birth. Filled with the Spirit, the soul of the church and the source of its bond of union, the disciples testified in their own Galilean accented Aramaic. Much to everyone's amazement, people in the large crowd – Egyptians, Parthians, Medes, Mesopotamians, Libyans, Cyrenes, Romans, Arabs and many others – each heard the disciples speaking Aramaic but understood in their own respective language. What had been done at Babel was undone in Jerusalem at Pentecost. In this view the church is, as Stanley Hauerwas observes, "God's new language."⁴¹ But this language aims at more than the unity of all Christians; unity is not the goal of the Spirit's sanctifying work. Although not particularly cognizant of Church of God ecclesiology, Hauerwas helps us understand more completely the implications of our theology of the church: "Salvation cannot be limited to changed self-understanding or to insuring meaningful existence for the individual. Salvation is God's creation of a new society which invites each person to become part of a time that the nations cannot provide."⁴² The name of that society is "church." Since 1881 we have stated that salvation makes one a member of the church, but we have not been as clear in our understanding of the church's purpose. Of course we understand that the church is to witness to the world and to the broken body of Christ. But the church itself in its daily practice also has a function.

⁴⁰ *ibid.*, p. 93

⁴¹ "The Church as God's New Language," in *Christian Existence Today: Essays on Church, World, and Living In Between*, (Durham, NC: Labyrinth Press, 1988), pp. 47-65

⁴² *ibid.*, p. 48

The church stands and properly lives as God's alternative to the world out of which Jesus' disciples are called. Through the sanctifying Spirit they are purified of worldly ways of doing business, worldly arrangements of power, worldly patterns of division and segregation. Pentecost and the formation of the church thus overturn Babel and Babylonian pretensions of power. The church stands as God's alternative to human confusion and power arrangements. If the world is to understand that its orders can bring neither peace nor salvation, then the unity of all Christians cannot be simply an ongoing discussion topic, but a key practice in the life of a church through which the world comes to believe that God sent Christ to be its savior.