

Education and History, Reforming the Reformation

by

Ernest W. Durbin II

History of the Church of God Reformation Movement

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Merle D. Strege

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On March 9, 1832, in his “Communication to the People of Sangamo County,” Abraham Lincoln stated, “That every man may receive at least a moderate education, and thereby be enabled to read the histories of his own and other countries, by which he may duly appreciate the value of our free institutions.”¹ In this sentence, Lincoln captures the importance of understanding history, the critical nature of education to that understanding, and the real impact the study of history can have on self-understanding. Be it in institutions or individuals, a properly developed self-understanding necessitates the knowledge of history, provided by education. Only in the context of history can people understand their relationship to others both past and present, ultimately determining their own position in history, their destiny.

In the tumultuous years of 1928 to 1934, the Church of God Reformation Movement wrestled with issues of history, education and destiny. A new group of leaders emerged in the movement who engaged the early fathers of the reformation and their theology which established the identity and destiny of the Church of God. With fresh perspectives on history, born from an appreciation of education, the new leadership reformed “the reformation”, resulting in new theological insights and altering the destiny of the Church of God.

¹ Roy P. Basler, ed., *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1953), Vol. 1 p. 8.

In 1928 the General Minister Association authorized a liberal arts program at Anderson Bible School and Seminary; subsequently in 1929 the name was changed to Anderson College and Theological Seminary. This transformation in educational emphasis was premeditated by G. Russell Olt (then Dean of students); but at the helm of the school during this transition was its first president, John A. Morrison.² Morrison envisioned a church that was open to new ideas and education was key to that vision.³ Being a champion of education, and seeking a more forward thinking church, Morrison focused his attention on the transformation from the bible school to liberal arts college. Opposite him in this quest was the formidable editor of *The Gospel Trumpet*, F. G. Smith.

F.G. Smith was not only editor of *The Gospel Trumpet* but was also the reigning expert on the Church of God apocalyptic ecclesiology. His understanding was rooted in the church-historical perspective, resulting in an interpretation of the apocalyptic books in a prophetic manner; indicating that the Church of God Movement was at the center of God's final act in history. The exclusive nature of this interpretation supported the doctrinal practice of calling people out of denominations into the movement known as "come-outism". This view of the church resulted in a separatist perspective supporting the notion that true believers were only those inside the reformation movement and outside of denominations. The dichotomy between this separatist perspective and the

² Merle D. Strege, *I Saw the Church: The Life of the Church of God told Theologically* (Anderson Indiana: Warner Press, 2002), 153-154.

³ Strege, 196.

Church of God's emphasis on Christian unity was discomfiting to many ministers in the movement. At the 1929 Anderson campmeeting, leading minister E. A. Reardon took issue with it.

E.A. Reardon boldly preached, "There is no body of people on earth who can claim an exclusive right to Christ and to all his light and truth... The spirit of unity is wider than our movement and cannot be confined to us... In order to be right ourselves, it is by no means necessary to believe that everybody else is wrong."⁴ These statements among others drew a line in the sand between Reardon and Smith. To refute the exclusivity (come-outism) of the movement was tantamount to rejecting the apocalyptic ecclesiology Smith heralded. Reardon would now find himself squarely in the camp of Morrison and the college. On the other side of the valley stood F. G. Smith and his patriots.

In the college, Professor Russell Byrum had openly taught many of Smith's presuppositions in his apocalyptic thought could not be supported. Byrum as well denounced come-outism as an outmoded belief.⁵ Proponents of Smith's theology formally complained about Byrum's "heresy" ensuing a trial in which he was ultimately acquitted. Byrum subsequently resigned his position at the college and it appeared as if Smith had won the day. In fact, the events solidified John A. Morrison's opinion that Smith was

⁴ Barry L. Callen, comp., *Following The Light: Teachings, Testimonies, Trials, and Triumphs of The Church of God Movement (Anderson), a Documentary History* (Anderson Indiana: Warner Press, 2000), 134-136.

⁵ Strege, 159.

growing too powerful and would hinder the advancement of the college. Morrison would work to see that Smith was not reappointed as editor of *The Gospel Trumpet*.

Sharing the view with Morrison that Smith was too powerful was Reardon. Both Reardon and Morrison sat on the board of directors of the Gospel Trumpet Company. Along with his disdain for the exclusive nature of Smith's teachings, Reardon was concerned with Smith representing himself on a missionary tour as the "leader" of the reformation.⁶ Reardon organized opposition on the board of directors, including A.T. Rowe, the chairman of the board. Rowe was opposed to the notion that the Church of God was exclusively correct in its theological views. As such, he was predisposed against the separatist approach espoused by Smith. Smith lost the vote and was deposed. The next editor of *The Gospel Trumpet* would be Charles E. Brown, whose respect for history positioned him in the education camp with the college.

Charles E. Brown took the reins of the Trumpet in 1930, and soon wrote the book *A New Approach to Christian Unity*. Noticeably absent in this work was the traditional notion of come-outism supported by the church-historical perspective of F. G. Smith.⁷ Rooted in the study of the history of Christianity, Brown recognized the importance of earlier Christian thought, and its profound positive effect for the cause of Christ. Brown identified a remnant of "radical Christianity"⁸ through the ages refuting the exclusive

⁶ Strege, 193.

⁷ Strege, 213.

⁸ Strege, 216.

perspective of the Church of God and its divine destiny. From his point of view, Brown established that the Church of God Movement was one of many “radical” Christian groups, placing the movement in history rather than at the end of history and laying groundwork for the idea that a Christian did not have to leave a denomination in order to be a part of God’s Church.⁹ These thoughts were a distinct departure from previous Editors of the *Gospel Trumpet*, and signaled other changes C. E. Brown would make from his influential position as its leader.

By referencing the Church of God Movement in the whole of Christian history, Brown conveyed acceptance of Christian brothers and sisters in the denominational world. This perspective took the teeth out of the exclusionary practices of earlier years, redefining the identity of the movement. The redefinition of identity was a change in theological perspective, but Brown also changed the structure and practices of the movement. Brown heralded the idea of “spiritual democracy”, that is spiritual equality and the universal priesthood of believers within unity of the church.¹⁰ The positive consequence of this inspiration was a migration away from the centralized power structure of the editorship to democratization of leadership in the movement. This resulted in changes implemented in the ordination and recognition of ministers as well as the broader participation by ministers in corporate decision-making.¹¹ The position of

⁹ Strege, 215,216,218.

¹⁰ Strege, 217.

¹¹ Strege, 219.

Editor at *the Gospel Trumpet* had changed, there was a new Editor and the role of the Editor was altered.

During the same year that Charles E. Brown replaced F.G. Smith as Editor; Otto F. Linn filled the vacancy left by Russell Byrum at Anderson College. Lynn introduced the historical-critical method of Bible interpretation to Anderson College during his tenure there which ended in 1936. This method of interpretation involves the study of historical, social and cultural factors and their impact on the original text. The exegetical methods employed by this approach contradict interpretations yielded by the church-historical ecclesiology. Lynn's application of the historical-critical method continued the erosion of the Church of God movement's exclusive apocalyptic identity.

When Lynn left the college in 1936, he began writing commentaries on The New Testament books. Editor of the Gospel Trumpet, Charles E. Brown published installments of this commentary until the manuscript for the book of Revelation was received. Because of its radical departure from F. G. Smith's church-historical apocalyptic interpretation and the inevitable controversy the different approach would stir up, Brown decided against publishing the final volume. Not wanting one person or small group to dominate published thought, A.T. Rowe, General Manager of the Trumpet, published the work under the commercial services portion of the company.¹² Lynn's application of the historical-critical method and the education it provided would continue to impact the identity and destiny of the Church of God movement.

From its very beginnings, the Church of God Reformation Movement has had a sense of destiny. At the core of this sense of destiny is the reformation emphasis on Christian unity. Early in the movement that concept of unity required Christian followers to leave their denominational bodies (which were perceived as naturally divisive) to join the one true church known as the Church of God. The emphasis on “coming out” from the denominations was supported by an exclusive apocalyptic identity founded on the church-historical ecclesiology. The unfortunate result of this exclusive apocalyptic understanding was the development of a narrow, separatist, protest based identity which truly ran opposite the direction of Christian unity.

Between 1928 and 1934 the Church of God Reformation Movement began the process of reforming itself as well as the church at large. This “re-reformation” came as a result of historical understanding and education. Brown’s appreciation of the church’s place in history, and Lynn’s application of the historical-critical method truly transformed the identity and self-understanding of the Church of God movement. Both men challenged the traditional church-historical ecclesiology. When the Church of God could no longer intelligently see itself as God’s exclusive final reformation the demand for Christians to “come out” from other denominations waned. The identity and the destiny of the movement were altered. Christian unity was properly redefined as believers in Jesus Christ irrespective of their denominational affiliation. The body of Christ could be united even though it is physically divided by denominational structure.

¹² Strege, 206.

The role of education in the “re-reformation” is critical. The appreciation of history and application of the historical-critical method would not have been possible without innate tension in the movement imposed by the introduction of Anderson College. The narrow leadership and perspective of the Church of God was accentuated by the monolithic institution of the Gospel Trumpet Company. The birth of Anderson College and the inception of the liberal arts program challenged the institutional authority which rested in the Trumpet and the theological presuppositions it published. The struggles which emerged between those both pro and con about the College broadened the debate on both institutional and theological issues. Although the front lines of the struggle appeared to be the institutions of the Trumpet and the College, the true battleground was theological and involved the destiny and identity of the Church of God movement.

The ultimate victor of this struggle could not be found in either camp although the wounded were evident on both sides. The quintessential victor was the Movement itself. Finding its position in history rather than at the end of history redefined its destiny. Understanding that it was not the exclusive agent of God broadened the Movements perspective on Christian unity. The Church of God would emerge from this period with a new identity and destiny refined by knowing its place in history and founded on a new appreciation for the importance of education in that process.

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