From Movement to Denomination, the Development of an Illusion

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HCUS 6010

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March 01, 2004

FROM MOVEMENT TO DENOMINATION, THE DEVELOPMENT OF AN ILLUSION

From its inception, the Church Of God of Anderson Indiana has had a clear vision of itself as a “movement” of God not a Protestant denomination. Early reformers had much disdain for denominations (sects) which they saw as unnecessarily dividing the Body of Christ and imposing “man rule” on the Church. They were very sensitive to being labeled another “sect” as they encouraged Christians to “come out” from their current denominations into the true Church, which they understood to be their reformation movement.

The attractiveness of their message and the subsequent growth of the movement forced the early leaders to organize and develop certain institutions in the early 1900’s. This institutionalization transformed the movement into a denomination; in some ways similar to those that the early reformers had “come out” from. The inconsistency between this institutionalization (a practice mandated by their growth) and their reformation ideals required a maturing of their theology. Both the institutionalization and the adjustment of their theology called into question their identity as a “movement" rather than a denomination. To answer this identity crisis, early Church of God leaders differentiated between organizing the Church and the business of the church. Consequently they developed an illusion that their highly organized “movement” was not another denomination; when in fact it bore many telltale signs of being a budding denominational body, complete with institutions, ministerial lists, various boards,

associated budgets, and all of the conflict and tension which inevitably follows these elements.

John W. V. Smith describes the beginning of the movement's history as "the romantic era of itinerants"[1]. In the very beginning those who have been called out from their denominations did not require much organization. Their lives were spent traveling from one locale to another sharing the message of the reformation. Few if any local congregations existed; those that did were very small and frequently met in homes or other available inexpensive facilities. In this time of idealism, organization was shunned and truly unnecessary as each minister or gospel company answered their own needs and developed their own itineraries. What organization existed rested in The Gospel Trumpet Company, which reported the activities of these "flying messengers" as well as promoting the ideals of the reformation.

The dedication and enthusiasm of these early reformers bore much fruit for the reformation. The message of the pioneers was being accepted, the circulation of *The Gospel Trumpet* was increasing, missionaries were dispatched and missionary homes established. All of this sowed seeds which sprouted into local congregations around the nation. Organization was no longer optional, as local congregations had to deal with issues of property ownership, and employment of fulltime pastors. The romantic period was ending and the practical everyday life of the local congregation was beginning.

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[1] John W. V. Smith, *The Quest For Holiness and Unity* (Anderson, Indiana: Warner Press Inc, 1980), 207.

Concurrent with the evolution of local congregations, the Gospel Trumpet Company was also undergoing change. Initially a nonprofit organization and under the control of D.S. Warner, the company had undergone several organizational and leadership changes since its inception. No changes as radical as those in 1917, which relinquished control of the organization to a created body known as the General Ministerial Assembly. The result of the leadership of the company abdicating was a more formal relationship with the church and a dramatic change in church organization. The June 28, 1917 issue of *The Gospel Trumpet* delineated the justification for this organizational change as; more attention to the movement's "business interests",the chance to take advantage of "unparalleled" evangelical opportunities that only a formal organization could afford, and a more direct and legal relationship between the Gospel Trumpet Company and the movement.[2]

The proliferation of local congregations and the introduction of The General Ministerial Assembly were only the beginning of changes during this period. The Anderson Bible Training School (later to become Anderson University) was instituted, the *The Yearbook Of The Church Of God,* was published, and other boards for foreign missions, church extension, and religious education convened. [3] All of these institutions and changes were in response to the movement's growth, and as noted were made with genuine concern for "evangelical opportunities" which resulted from the growth. The

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[2] Merle D. Strege, *"I Saw The Church:" The Life of the Church of God told Theologically* (Anderson, Indiana: Warner Press, a subsidiary of the Church of God Ministries, Inc, 2002), 136.

[3] Smith, *The Quest For Holiness and Unity*, 205.

Church of God Movement had developed to the point where it could no longer ignore organizational responsibility. But with that responsibility and the parallel evangelical opportunities, came controversy surrounding the "man rule" aspects of these institutions and organizational decisions. The movement's leaders now had to reconcile their mandated organization with their reformation ideals, resulting in a maturing of their theology regarding the church and its organization.

From the beginning early reformers believed in the divine organization of the Church. Inherent in this divine organization is the gifting for ministry of individual members of the body of Christ by the Holy Spirit. This concept of charismatic church government[4] implies that God is in control of the Church and He sets up its organization as well as its leadership. In practice this meant "no human organization" resulting in the absence of offices, titles, committees, boards, elections, or appointments.[5] The new organizations and institutions which began in 1917 were dichotomous to the concept of charismatic church government. It was no longer realistic for this generation of reformers to embrace "no human organization" in practice. They had in fact "organized" the movement.

The reformers who had created this organization expounded on the theological principle of charismatic church government. What resulted was a clarification and differentiation between organizing the Church and the business of the church. The

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[4]Strege, *"I Saw The Church*", 26.

[5]Smith, *The Quest for Holiness and Unity*, 93.

Church, as the Body of Christ, could not be organized by man. Only God can provide salvation and thereby entrance into the Body of Christ. It rests with the Holy Spirit alone to gift members of the Body for ministry, and to appoint them to the ministry. But the organization of the "business of the church" is a different matter. The business of the church is understood to be its functions. As such, to be good stewards of the gifts God has given them; it is appropriate and necessary to organize this work. Christians are God's hands and feet and they are to do God's physical ministry as he has gifted them for it. As stated in *The Gospel Trumpet* article, organization provides unparalleled "evangelical opportunity", in essence it is the responsibility of Christians to organize " the business of the church".

This maturing of their theology of the Church was necessary to answer the identity crisis which arose from the organization of "the movement". The generation of leaders who were charged with responsibility of organizing "the business of the church" did not want to depart from the original ideal of being a "reformation movement" rather than a denomination. Their differentiation between the Church and "the business of the church" is a theologically sound and well articulated concept. This demarcation provides the mindset necessary for these reformers to continue to separate themselves and their message from the denominations. Theologically they had matured and provided justification for the institutionalization of the movement mandated by its growth.

An objective analysis of this era of organization and institutionalization yields another perspective. To the outsider (outside the movement, not the Church) it is evident that those years of organization were in fact when the Church of God began to behave

and practice like a denomination. Local congregations were being organized, institutions of education and ministry were founded, numerous boards were called into being, lists of ministers were developed, bylaws and constitutions were written, and church discipline performed. The Church Of God had the rudimentary structures necessary to be known as a denomination in its own right. Outside of the Church of God Movement other members of the Christian community perceive “the movement” as a “denomination”. But this distinction in terms is more than semantics, The Church of God’s identity and mission is wrapped up in the notion of being “a movement” although for all practical purposes it became a denomination in these early years.

Because of the importance of being a “movement” to the identity of the reformation, the organizational forefathers of The Church of God could not even conceptualize being known as a denomination. Their distinction between the Church and the “business of the church” allowed them to operate in their own minds under the illusion that they were not a denomination. This illusion was absent of malice on the part of these leaders, and benign in its impact to the greater Church at large; that is the whole body of Christ including those believers outside the movement. Inside of the movement, the illusion was essential to maintaining the identity and mission espoused in the reformation ideals.

Under the illusion it could only be a movement, The Church of God adopted the structure and practices of a denomination in the early 1900’s. Making a distinction between the Church and “the business of the church”, allowed the reformation to continue under its own definition. The organizational structures and institutions it

developed afforded the movement additional evangelical opportunities which resulted in further growth of the movement, and an even higher level of organization. The maturing in theological perspective and new “denominational” practices opened a dialogue within the reformation movement and the Church at large, exposing others to the essential messages of the Church of God Movement. The Church of God could continue to call people to their understanding of the truth, God’s revelation regarding the true Church and holiness.

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