

Theological Liberalism: the Validation of Experience in the Church of God Reformation  
Movement

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## THEOLOGICAL LIBERALISM: VALIDATION OF EXPERIENCE IN THE CHURCH OF GOD REFORMATION MOVEMENT

Charles E. Brown, dedicated historian, and fourth editor of *The Gospel Trumpet*, was the first Church Of God writer<sup>1</sup> to perceive similarities between their reformation movement and an earlier reformation movement known as “Pietism”. The term “Pietism” was first applied to a reformation movement within German Lutheranism led by Philip Jacob Spener, the founder, and August Hermann Francke, a spiritual disciple of Spener. The Pietist protest was largely a reaction against orthodox formalism and Protestant Scholasticism “wherein the Christian life centered upon the passive acceptance of closely defined dogmas, the reception of the sacraments, and participation in the ordinances of the church.”<sup>2</sup> Charles E. Brown summarized the Pietist message as emphasizing life and experience over knowledge and doctrine.<sup>3</sup>

The common thread woven between these reformation movements was the magnitude of personal experience in relation to understanding God. As with the Pietists, early Church of God leaders operated under the major theological presupposition that

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<sup>1</sup> Merle D. Strege, *I Saw the Church: The Life out of the Church of God told Theologically* (Anderson, Indiana: Warner Press, 2002), 226.

<sup>2</sup> John H. Armstrong, "Editor's Introduction," *Reformation and Revival* 10, no. 1 (Winter 2001): 8-9.

<sup>3</sup> Strege, 226.

religion, for the Christian, was essentially experiential.<sup>4</sup> Theology based on personal experience, coupled with anti-creedal tenets, yielded a degree of doctrinal fluidity in the Church of God. New experiences and changes in the interpretation of experience would result in the modification of practices and doctrinal positions inside the reformation movement. In the mid twentieth century, experiential change altered practices of divine healing and redefined core understandings of unity and holiness inside the Church of God Movement. Changes in interpretive experience did not displace these positions and practices but broadened their application and validated their significance.

The Church of God Reformation Movement has always had an interest in divine healing. E. E. Byrum, second editor of *The Gospel Trumpet*, had the most influence on the early Church of God theology of divine healing.<sup>5</sup> From Byrum's perspective, divine healing was a mark of the true church; Christ's atonement purchased the possibility of physical as well as spiritual wholeness; the root cause of illness was moral as well as physical; and that those who were not healed lacked sufficient faith or harbored some secret sin.<sup>6</sup> Early saints as a natural consequence of this theology were reluctant to use physicians and medications, preferring to rely on faith.

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<sup>4</sup> John W. V. Smith, *The Quest for Holiness and Unity* (Anderson, Indiana: Warner Press, 1980), 86.

<sup>5</sup> Strege, 232.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 232, 70, 72-73 .

This “faith without physicians” aspect of divine healing was altered to “faith with physicians” in the mid twentieth century. Coinciding with improvements in medical practice, tragic experiences of prominent and respected people in the movement played a role in this revision. In spite of the prayers of the saints, the sudden loss of Clarence Hunter’s twin girls and the continued suffering of Charles Wesley Naylor were difficult to reconcile with Byrum’s theology. A few rumors aside, the spirituality of these leaders was unchallenged in the eyes of the early believers. Their experience of suffering revised the doctrinal practice of divine healing and expanded its interpretation to include divine healing through physicians. The movement did not abandon the belief in divine healing which would create “faith in physicians”, but expanded its understanding of God’s ability to work through physicians, or “faith with physicians”.<sup>7</sup> Doctrinal practice, in this case foundational elements of divine healing, was revised by new experience and or a new interpretation of experience.

Undergraduate students from Anderson College began graduating in the 1930’s with liberal arts degrees. Many of these students had majored in Bible or religion and desired further education in these concentrations. Prior to 1953, Oberlin Seminary in Ohio became the school of choice for the majority of these graduates. Teaching at Oberlin was Walter Marshall Horton, a noted neo-liberal theologian. Neo-liberals were about the task of reforming liberalism, “warning that liberalism had to change its ways if

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 234.

it was to speak to modern man.”<sup>8</sup> In their effort to update and revise liberalism, neo-liberalists introduced dialogue on issues of realism versus idealism, the orthodox doctrine of sin, the divinity of Jesus and most significantly a new sense of the importance of the church.<sup>9</sup> Inside the context of experience, neo-liberalists proclaimed that “religion must offer a power to change man's life as well as education in ethical ideals.”<sup>10</sup> Under the teaching of the Horton and other progressive instructors, these graduate students, who would become leaders in the movement, were exposed to theological liberalism. Their educational experiences with theological liberalism would amend perspectives on Church of God theological positions, two of primary concern were unity and holiness.

The Church of God’s perspective on unity has always been at the very core of its self identity. In the early stages of the reformation movement, leaders understood church unity as the antithesis of denominational separation. Their solution for the fracturing of the body of Christ by denominations was to “call out” true believers from the denominations into the Church of God Reformation Movement. Denominations were “dealt out” not “dealt with”, there was no room for ecumenical activity. John W. V. Smith, a professor of Church History at Anderson School of Theology, embraced theological liberalism during his doctoral studies at the University of Southern California. His experiences with ecumenical activities while pursuing his doctorate molded his

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<sup>8</sup> William Hordern, *A Layman's Guide to Protestant Theology: Revised Edition* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc, 1968), 104.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 105-109.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 108.

understanding of the practice of Christian unity.<sup>11</sup> Smith joined theological liberalism's interest in ecumenical Christianity with the Movement's commitment to Christian unity, redefining attitudes toward denominations, now involving cooperation and totally devoid of come-outism.<sup>12</sup> Smith did not de-emphasize the importance of unity but re-emphasized its importance in a broader more ecumenical interpretation.

Gene Wilson Newberry was a colleague of Smith, teaching at Anderson School of Theology, and also serving as Dean for twelve years. Although certainly a scholar, Newberry was committed to making theology relevant and practical in the life of the local congregation, a product of his experience with Horton.<sup>13</sup> From this focus on relevant theology Newberry began a rethinking of sanctification. Newberry stated "holiness turns more on the presence of love than the absence of sin",<sup>14</sup> a break from traditional Church of God holiness teaching. Previous teaching declared what the believer must leave behind in pursuit of holiness, resulting in asceticism and a legalistic moral code. Newberry's redefinition focused on what is to be added to the believer, principally love. This new definition expanded the notion of holiness beyond the individual believer to how the believer interacts with others. Although theologically

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<sup>11</sup> Strege, 241.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid..

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 242.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 243.

conservative, Newberry demonstrated liberal influence in his tendency to subjugate religious traditions in favor of religious experience.<sup>15</sup>

The very earliest leaders of the Church of God Reformation Movement perceived one facet of the Church was “the quality of openness.”<sup>16</sup> By this perception they understood that God, through the Holy Spirit, continues to reveal knowledge of Himself and His will to the Church. Since all divine truth is contained in the scriptures, human understanding of that truth can and should increase.<sup>17</sup> This characteristic of openness, perceived by the earliest leaders, was lived out in the experience of those leading in the mid twentieth century. Their graduate studies introduced them to theological liberalism, subsequently enlightening new perspectives on traditional notions of their reformation theology. Their response was to rethink these doctrinal positions without discarding them, broadening their understanding and application of them. Exposure to liberalism in fact validated their experience of doctrinal positions and practices. Anchored by their personal experience, these leaders would teach future generations new expressions of the original “quality of openness”.

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 244.

<sup>16</sup> Smith, 93.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid..

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