

A Brief History of the Formation of the Church of God General Conference

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Much about the formation of the Church of God, Age-to-Come movement in America prior to the 1840's is still unknown. A series of articles in *The Restitution Herald* and the *Church of God History Newsletter* has done much to clarify our understanding of the early years of the movement. At this point we are able to outline briefly the development of the Church of God, emphasizing its relationships with other movements and disclosing some of the struggles that led to its final reorganization in 1921.

I. INCEPTION AND EARLY DEVELOPMENT

Many who had endured the Bitter Disappointment of October 22, 1844, still believed wholeheartedly in the near return of Christ to this earth to establish the Kingdom of God. Some of them were Literalist, Conditionalist, Arminian,¹ Age to Come, Zionist, Millenarian, and Biblical unitarian. Generally, each one of these doctrines fell outside the realm of accepted orthodoxy.

The unitarian doctrine seems to have developed in America at the end of the eighteenth century. Sydney Ahlstrom, noted Yale historian of

¹"Arminianism was a term used to designate almost any form of Reformed theology that modified the traditional doctrines of total depravity, limited atonement, or unconditional election and accentuated man's role in salvation" (Sydney Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People*, Garden City, New York: Image Books, 1975, 490).

religion, notes that two or three smaller groups were developing at the same time as the emergence of the King's Chapel Unitarian movement. These groups shared a concern for a return to the "primitive gospel." Ahlstrom writes:

One of these was the so-called Christian Connection, a minority revivalistic movement among people of lowly station on the New England frontier. Strongly anti-Calvinistic in sentiment, it grew contemporaneously with the similar body of Freewill Baptists, who were also strongest in Vermont, New Hampshire, and Maine; and many of its ministers had been ordained by Freewill congregations. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the two groups contemplated merging, since both held similar doctrines, inclined toward primitivism, and practiced open communion. But as they expanded westward across New York State, the "Christians" began more and more to show Unitarian tendencies, which alienated them from the Baptists and turned them toward the Stonites—and occasionally toward the Unitarians.²

Another group of "Christians" with a Methodist background came out of Virginia and North Carolina and worked with Barton Stone. It would seem safe to conjecture that the Church of God emerged primarily from the unitarian Christian Connection, with which Joseph Marsh had been associated.³ Marsh became one of the most vocal Age-to-Come publishers, after his earlier work with the Christian connection and as an editor of Millerite papers. In 1841, Marsh had written fourteen influential articles entitled "The Church of God" in which he had insisted on the return of the Church to New Testament principles.

It should be noted that the development of the Church of God was not isolated from other religious developments in American history. Our growth coincided with that of the Unitarian denomination and the Christian Connection, the latter group contributing significantly to the theology of the emerging Adventist movement. Individuals such as Joseph Marsh, who remained aloof from the mainstream, concentrated on Age-to-Come doctrine, even though major tenets of our faith were held in common with other groups. From the Congregationalists, the Church of God developed church polity; Arminianism was a common doctrine with the Methodists; the unity of God and Divinity of Christ proved an area of agreement with the Unitarians; evangelical interest and primitiv-

²*Ibid.*, 541.

³This is not to deny a connection with English Literalists and early heretical Baptists, linking our movement to the Radical Reformation.

ism were held in common with the Christian Connection. Parallel with all early American denominations was an intense effort to spread the Word by publishing quality journals.

Joseph Marsh was the leading editor for the emerging Church of God, publishing first the *Voice of Truth*, then the *Advent Harbinger*, and, finally, the *Bible Expositor*. Marsh was also in contact with several congregations across New England and Canada West. R.V. Lyon, another evangelist, worked primarily among the western brethren in Canada.

II. SOCIAL CONCERNS WITHIN THE MOVEMENT

As the church developed during the mid-nineteenth century, it struggled with the same ethical questions which faced other denominations. A brief survey of some of Marsh's early journals will reveal some of the social attitudes which prevailed among the people.

Four short articles concerning the temperance question appeared in the *Advent Harbinger* in 1851. One was written by O.R.L. Crozier, a former advocate of the "Shut Door" theory. Crozier admonished the Methodist Conference for tabling a measure regarding the endorsement of the Maine law in 1851. He maintained that the Group should not be so hesitant above endorsing the law.

That same year, a letter was published by Rockwell Thompson from Macedonia, Ohio. He wrote that the consequences of intemperance are blasted reputations, homes made desolate, and fortunes squandered. Not enough zeal was being shown for temperance. Christians should try to persuade others by their good example and advise both seller and buyer to forego their self-destruction, serve the Lord, and await His coming.

It must be concluded that at least in the year 1851, Joseph Marsh and his readers were not primarily occupied about the temperance issue. This is particularly evident if one compares the number of articles concerning temperance (four articles) to the number of articles devoted to women leaders in the church (thirteen articles) and the subject of abolition (thirty-one articles, including a lengthy discourse on the Federal Anti-Slave Act).

III. THE CHURCH OF GOD, ADVENTISM, AND CHRISTADELPHIANISM

Many Age-to-Come evangelists, including J.L. Burnham, R.P. Moore, N.A. Hitchcock, and H.V. Reed, had contact with pioneer brethren on the

frontier and, as a result, Marsh's writings were being mailed to subscribers in the West. Marsh was also contacted by a group of English Millenarians in Geneva, Illinois. These Millenarians—James, Joseph, John, and Benjamin Wilson—had already been in contact with John Thomas.

John Thomas had been friends simultaneously with Alexander Campbell and Nathaniel Field. Field was part of the Adventist movement, but Campbell was not. Campbell eventually dissociated himself from Thomas because of the latter's views on the mortality of man. Thomas was then left to gravitate towards Field. Through Field, Thomas learned of Joseph Marsh, the foremost exponent of Age-to-Come doctrine. As a result of these connections, Thomas became convinced of the doctrine of the Kingdom of God on the earth in the Age to Come. Writing in the third person, Thomas confessed:

His faith had now attained an amplitude it had not possessed before. It embraced the hope of God's calling to his kingdom and glory in the name of Jesus as the future Lord and sovereign of the world. He now perceived what the faith of the gospel was that was necessary to constitute an immersion Christian baptism. It was nothing less than the Gospel of the Kingdom of God and the name of Jesus as the Christ; and he discovered accordingly that if a man would inherit that kingdom he must believe with an honest and good heart the things concerning it. It was not simply a Future Age of glory, but it was "a kingdom, glory, and dominion" in that age with "honor and immortality" that were the glad tidings of "the truth as it is in Jesus." To become a joint-heir with him of this kingdom the Editor was immersed in 1847. Having thus obeyed the gospel himself, he forthwith commenced its announcement to others in the United States, and afterwards in Britain.⁴

Eventually, Thomas' sectarianism drove him to break with Field and Marsh in a barrage of scathing articles. In 1859, Field wrote:

The doctor is very hard on the Adventists, Millerism, and Storrism. I fear he is ungrateful. For had it not been for the Advent movement, I do not believe that this day he would have a corporal's guard of followers. A broken down ex-Campbellite, he goes north to take advantage of the movement, and is now building on other men's foundation, and all the while exposing its rottenness! Such, at least is my opinion of his course.⁵

⁴John Thomas, "On the Names of Our Periodicals," *Herald of the Kingdom and Age to Come*, Vol. 1, No. 1, January, 1851, 4.

⁵Nathaniel Field, "Thomasism, Number III," *Expositor and Advocate*, Vol. 29, No. 24, May 15, 1859, 665.

In an editorial addition to the article, Marsh wrote of Thomas' "manifest ingratitude to those who raised him from obscurity to his present notoriety among us."⁶

While on a trip through Ogle County, Illinois, during the Civil War, Thomas applied at the county courthouse for the creation of a new denomination, the Christadelphians (Brethren in Christ). From that time on, although Age-to-Come believers in the Church of God tradition held many doctrines in common with Christadelphians, they developed as separate organizations. They often met together in congregational worship, although the latter would not celebrate communion with the former. At this time, the members of the newly organized Advent Christian denomination fellowshiped closely with Church of God believers, often worshipping and attending conferences with them.

IV. FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

As John Thomas became an increasingly unpopular person among Age-to-Come believers, Benjamin Wilson, editor of the *Gospel Banner* and translator of the *Emphatic Diaglott*, grew more prominent in influence. After the death of Joseph Marsh in Michigan in the early sixties, Benjamin Wilson and his nephew Thomas Wilson became more widely read and accepted among the leading exponents of the Age-to-Come doctrine, which among other things explained that the Jews would one day return to their land and become a nation. This doctrine was advanced long before the Zionist movement became a popular topic. In the early days, the return of Israel to its native land was a subject for scorn by the orthodox denominations. Even reformers like Alexander Campbell who were willing to be open-minded on many points of doctrine nevertheless shunned this teaching.

V. ORGANIZATION

The early leaders of our movement generally avoided organization. Wilson wrote extensive articles encouraging congregations to organize themselves with elders and deacons, yet they hesitated. Some visionaries were desirous of organizing a general conference of individual congrega-

tions and state conferences for the purpose of uniting to conduct business and develop educational and missionary programs.

In 1888 at Philadelphia, and again in 1889 in Chicago, conferences were established in attempts to form a national organization. The minutes of the latter conference indicate that the board continued to function until 1892 when it disbanded due to its inability to convince people to support the work financially. In 1921, however, a national organization became a reality.

Since its reorganization in 1921, the Church of God has continued to stress the importance of local congregations, supporting them while not threatening their autonomy. The churches affiliated with the corporate headquarters elect delegates to attend an annual General Conference meeting. Denominational business is conducted, but the direction comes from the local churches, not from the headquarters.

In the seventy years of its existence, the denomination has maintained a small Bible college, published literature for worldwide distribution, maintained an active youth program, engaged in foreign missions, and participated in the Church-growth movement. With the move of its headquarters to the more promising Atlanta area and the creation of a new theological journal, the Church of God seeks to make its heritage more widely known.

⁶*Ibid.*