

# **THE HEART OF THE CHURCH OF GOD TEACHING TRADITION**

Barry L. Callen & Cliff D. Sanders

## PREFACE

The Church of God Movement (Anderson) has a long and rich teaching tradition. The central motivation of this tradition has been a sensed call from God to be a prophetic voice to the whole of God's people.

The core message of this Movement's voice has been that the church is God's. It must be freed of the shackles of human creeds, traditions, and institutionalism so that it again can be its divinely intended self. To accomplish this, the community of Christ must be encouraged to gather around the Master and be renewed and empowered by the Spirit of Christ. Jesus is the Subject! The Holiness and Unity of God's people are the goals.

Wanting to avoid becoming merely another expression of the many compromised "churches" over the centuries, this Movement has resisted writing its own restrictive creeds and overly institutionalizing its own life. This resistance has been both the glory and agony of the Movement.

On the positive side, it has allowed God's Spirit more freedom to constitute, inform, and guide the church's life. On the negative side, it has allowed on occasion an unstructured chaos featuring a vacuum of clear teaching and mission understanding. The general perspectives of the Movement have become less clearly known over time, especially by new generations within its own life.

In the 2020-2021 period, numerous leaders within the Movement sought to identify briefly the general teaching perspectives that have formed the core of the Movement's tradition since the 1880s. The intent was not to create another group "creed," but rather to capture the divinely-inspired heartbeat of this special body of believers. These core and longstanding commitments are believed to be thoroughly biblical and capture well God's will for today's Christian community globally.

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### ***I SAW THE CHURCH***

Merle D. Strege, 2002

### ***THEOLOGY FOR DISCIPLES***

Gilbert W. Stafford, 2012

### ***APPROACHING THEOLOGY***

Barry L. Callen, 2015

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We have sought to bring forward here the fruit of this recent seeking and identifying of the Movement's belief foundations. We now make the result available widely. We pray that our effort will freshly inform and newly inflame the Church of God Movement to fulfill its high calling on behalf of all of God's people today.

Rev. Dr. Barry L. Callen  
Rev. Dr. Cliff D. Sanders  
October 2021

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**GOD AS LOVING GRACE**

Barry L. Callen, 2018

**THE OPTIMISM OF GRACE**

Cliff D. Sanders, 2020

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## **CORE COMMITMENTS OF THE CHURCH OF GOD TEACHING TRADITION**

The Church of God Movement is a global fellowship rooted in and committed to the historic Christian faith. It has not sought to “innovate” in doctrine or practice. The longing has been “to return to the original essence of Christianity, casting aside the tangle of churchly debris that has accumulated over the centuries—competitive structures, divisive creeds, and human usurpings of Christ as head of the church.” The whole truth lies in the Person of Christ and the only boundary to membership in his church is the experience of salvation by faith alone in the atonement that God has provided.<sup>1</sup>

The General Assembly of the Church of God in the United States and Canada has reserved the right to “declare on occasion when individual ministers or congregations are not recognized as adhering to the general reformation principles and practices to which the Assembly itself is committed.” Likewise, state, regional, and provincial assemblies of the Church of God, responsible for ministerial credentialing, reserve the right to withhold credentials from ministerial candidates who do not adhere to the teaching tradition of the Church of God Movement. Enforcing that right requires definition of this tradition.

As a “reform” movement beginning in the late nineteenth century, the Church of God has held certain distinctive perspectives judged critical for implementing Christian faith in contemporary times. Rather than forming and mandating

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<sup>1</sup> For a recent publication that traces the historic roots, central convictions, and current challenges facing this Movement, see *Forward, Ever Forward! The Church of God Movement Yesterday and Tomorrow* (Anderson University Press, Emeth Press, and Mid-America Christian University Press, 2020).

another detailed and restrictive “creed,” these perspectives are judged biblical keynotes vital for spiritual health and energizing mission effectiveness in today’s church. They often have been celebrated in song more than written in propositional formulas.

These distinctive reform perspectives, when combined with the basics of biblical Christianity narrated in the Bible and celebrated in the Protestant Reformation, comprise the distinctive teaching heritage of the Church of God Movement. It is crucial that all credentialed ministers of the Movement appreciate and affirm these distinctive perspectives.

Following are nine reformation perspectives central to the teaching tradition of the Church of God Movement. They are understood to be thoroughly biblical and thus not “denominational” in any narrow or divisive sense. The endnotes direct to sources that elaborate dependably on these brief summary paragraphs.

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## BACK TO THE BLESSED OLD BIBLE

## THE BIBLE IS OUR RULE OF FAITH

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## 1. THE BIBLE AS AUTHORITY

The Bible truly is the divinely inspired Word of God. “The Bible is without error [foundational] in all that it affirms, in accordance with its own purpose, namely that it is ‘profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work’ (2 Timothy 3:16-17, NAS), and it therefore is fully trustworthy and authoritative as the infallible guide for understanding the Christian faith and living the Christian life.”<sup>2</sup>

Disciplined biblical interpretation is crucial.<sup>3</sup> The Spirit of God that inspired the writing of the original texts now seeks to illumine their contemporary meaning. Our best efforts are required to hear properly the voice of God. Formal study of the complexities of interpretation is urged for all ministerial candidates. Such study highlights vital reading aids, the contributing of human reasoning and experience, including tested methods of biblical exegesis, preferably employed in a community context. These tend to enable the best hearing of the voice of God’s Spirit in the Bible relatively free of individual preference and limited knowledge.<sup>4</sup>

Song lyrics by D. Otis Teasley and Charles W. Naylor: “Back to the blessed old Bible.” “The Bible is our rule of faith and Christ alone is Lord.”

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<sup>2</sup>Statement of the 1981 General Assembly of the Church of God, United States and Canada.

<sup>3</sup>This disciplined approach to interpretation should include the “historical-grammatical” method that strives to discover the biblical author’s originally intended meaning by considering a text’s grammatical style and its cultural, historical, and literary contexts.

<sup>4</sup>For elaboration of what often is called the “Wesleyan Quadrilateral,” the proper interaction of these reading aids, see *Approaching Theology* (Callen, 2015), 82-85. For an extended study of issues and guidelines for proper biblical study, see *The Scripture Principle* (Baker Academic, 2006; third edition, Emeth Press, 2009) and *Bible Reading in Wesleyan Ways* (Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 2004).

## 2. THE RESURRECTED JESUS AS FOUNDATIONAL EVENT

The Bible clearly teaches that the bodily resurrection of Jesus, the Son, was a direct and redeeming action of God, the Father. It was the actual historical event that declared the full Lordship of Christ and became central to the very beginning of Christian church history. It was the dramatic launching of God's ongoing project of infusing this fallen world with the transforming life of heaven. This pivotal event appears centrally in the Apostles' Creed, an ancient and universal statement of Christian belief, and is the hope of all believers for new life now and hereafter. This Creed correctly builds around the classic Trinitarian understanding of God. God the Father acted; God the Son was raised; God the Spirit now teaches the great meanings of it all.

As observed in a report approved by the 1986 General Assembly: "The Spirit of God teaches about the meaning of Jesus' lordship, enables a correct reading of the Bible, and inspires a proper manner of implementing the life and ministry of the church in each time and place." Faith is a pilgrimage guided by the Spirit of Jesus toward more and more light. Focus should remain on the person of Jesus who himself is the truth and light of the world.

Song lyrics by W. Dale Oldham and William J. Gaither: "Let me see Jesus only, Only he can satisfy." "Jesus, Jesus, Jesus! There's just something about that name! Master, Savior, Jesus! Like the fragrance after the rain."

## 3. BEING CONVICTIONAL WITHOUT BEING CREEDAL

Church of God people have been very convictional about biblical basics, such as found in the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds. They also have avoided limiting thought and diversity to any historically-conditioned statement of the past. No creed should compete with the Bible as authority, otherwise there arises unnecessary division in the Christian community that is an unnecessary obstacle to church mission. Any "sectarian spirit" has been resisted vigorously by this Movement from its beginning, even if on occasion the Movement has been guilty of such itself.<sup>5</sup>

Song lyrics by Charles W. Naylor: "The day of sects and creeds for us forevermore is past. All we are equal in His sight when we obey His Word."

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**WE PREACH CHRIST!**

**WE BELIEVE ALL CLEARLY  
TAUGHT IN SCRIPTURE**

**CONTOURS OF A CAUSE**  
Barry L. Callen, 1995

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<sup>5</sup> For a detailed consideration of the classic keynotes of the Church of God teaching tradition, see the 1995 book *Contours of a Cause*. This tradition does not insist on a wide range of theological details but does have discernable contours that are vital. This presentation of the distinctives of the teaching heritage of the Church of God identifies the broad contours of this tradition.

#### 4. BEING GOD'S CHURCH, THE PENTECOST PEOPLE

Christian faith and church life must be Spirit-oriented. The church is the community of the Spirit, first Spirit-filled and commissioned at Pentecost. When her true self, the church is gifted, empowered, and governed by the Spirit of God. Regardless of what organizational plan is employed for church life or what theological creed affirmed, the Spirit must be allowed to teach, work, and guide as the Spirit wills.

The church, the people of the Spirit, is to embody the new life enabled by the Spirit and be on mission to spread the good news of the Risen Jesus worldwide. This is to be done without fear or discrimination on the basis of nationality, race, or gender. These human distinctions do not bind the Spirit's work. Women, for instance, are eligible for church leadership at all levels as the Spirit chooses to gift and call.

Song lyrics by Daniel S. Warner and Ray McCutcheon: "Fill me with Thy Spirit, Lord." "We're building a circle of love; we'll start with you and me. We're building a circle of love; come join God's family!"

#### 5. ON BEING A "MOVEMENT" OF GOD

All bodies of Christians should focus on being fellowship and mission "movements," seeking to avoid the pitfalls of excessive church institutionalism. The church fellowship should be communal and inclusive, not dictatorial. While organizing the church's work is necessary stewardship, claiming biblical finality for any organizational pattern or theological formulation is inappropriate and hurtful to church fellowship and mission. To be resisted is any "sectarian" spirit that arrogantly separates a particular body of believers from all others and claims superior knowledge of the Spirit's will and ways.

The 1995 biography of Daniel S. Warner, primary pioneer of the Church of God Movement, proclaims, *It's God's Church!* All Christians have much to learn from each other and must intentionally be open to such learning and not structure their corporate lives and missions in ways that obstruct that openness. The whole church belongs to each believer and each believer belongs to the whole church, not merely to one segment of it.

Song lyrics about the church by Charles W. Naylor: "Divinely built, divinely ruled, To God she doth submit. His will her law, His truth her guide, Her path is glory lit." "We reach our hands in fellowship to every bloodwashed one."

## 6. THE CONTEXT OF PARTICULAR CHRISTIAN TRADITIONS

All Christians find themselves in one of the many historic Christian traditions. The Church of God Movement emerged primarily from the English Wesleyan-Holiness tradition and the European Anabaptist and Pietist traditions, particularly as these were transplanted to North America. Much has been gleaned and treasured from these traditions.

The Wesleyan tradition affirms a profound mutuality in God's dealing with humans. Human participation is possible only because of God's grace that enables (1) the genuine choice and thus responsibility of the sinner, (2) a corporate and not individual understanding of Divine election, and (3) the potential of salvation for all persons.<sup>6</sup> Considered "high church" in some ways, the Wesleyan tradition also is practical and experiential. See particularly *The Radical Wesley*.<sup>7</sup> Song lyrics by Charles Wesley: "He breaks the power of cancelled sin, He sets the prisoner free. His blood can make the foulest clean, His blood availed for me."

The Anabaptist and Pietist traditions are more "low church" in focus, insisting on freedom from restrictive denominational and political structures. Christian identity and church membership must be rooted in genuine Christian "experience," persons being forgiven and actually transformed into the image of Christ by action of the Spirit of the Risen Jesus. Affiliation with a church body, especially

one officially sanctioned by a nation-state, apart from such new life in Christ, is false church membership and poor theology. True belief is to be experienced in the community of the Spirit and lived out in the world, not merely recited in church.<sup>8</sup>

Song lyrics by Daniel S. Warner and W. Dale Oldham: "My name is in the book of life, O bless the name of Jesus!" "Dead to every worldly pleasure, Dead indeed to sin am I."

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**THE QUEST FOR HOLINESS AND UNITY**  
John W. V. Smith, with Merle D. Strege, 2009

**RADICAL CHRISTIANITY**  
Barry L. Callen, 1999

**THE HOLY RIVER OF GOD**  
Barry L. Callen, 2016

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<sup>6</sup>For full explanation of this "profound mutuality" and its important theological implications, see *The Optimism of Grace* by Cliff Sanders (2016), *Clark H. Pinnock: Journey Toward Renewal* (especially chap. 4) (2000), and *Responsible Grace: John Wesley's Practical Theology* by Randy L. Maddox (1994).

<sup>7</sup>See *The Radical Wesley* by Howard A. Snyder (1996, rev. 2014).

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<sup>8</sup>For a full explanation of these more "radical" expressions of the Protestant Reformation, see Charles E. Brown, *When Souls Awaken* (1954) and Barry L. Callen, *Radical Christianity* (1999).

## 7. CHRISTIAN HOLINESS AND UNITY AT THE CORE

The journey of the Church of God Movement has been a quest for the holiness of each believer (“sanctification”) and the holiness of the church itself (unity in the Spirit).<sup>9</sup> Holiness is growing day by day through the inner work of the Spirit to be more and more like Jesus (1 Thess. 4:1-8, 5:23). It necessarily becomes social in nature, “faith working through love” (Gal. 5:6). A core teaching of the Bible is that a holy God desires and is prepared to enable the holiness of God’s people (Lev. 20:26). Song lyrics by Mildred E. Howard: “Since Jesus gave his life for me, Should I not give Him mine? I’m consecrated, Lord, to Thee, I shall be wholly Thine.”

Unity among Christians is crucial to effective church mission. It will not be achieved by Christians agreeing on all points of theology and practice or by denominations flowing together into one master church organization. Christian unity is the natural fruit of common and maturing new life in the Spirit of Christ (holiness). It involves willingly submitting to one another (Eph. 5:21) and an intentional activating of the Spirit-family oneness in mission together.<sup>10</sup>

Song lyrics by Charles W. Naylor and Daniel S. Warner: “Let divisions be forsaken, all the holy join in one.” “How sweet this bond of perfectness, The wondrous love of Jesus! A pure foretaste of heaven’s bliss, O fellowship so precious!”

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### **THE MEANING OF SANCTIFICATION**

Charles E. Brown, 1945, 2013

### **RECEIVE THE HOLY SPIRIT**

Arlo F. Newell, 1978

### **COMMITMENT TO HOLINESS**

Kenneth E. Jones, 1985

### **THE PRAYER OF HOLINESS-HUNGRY PEOPLE**

Barry L. Callen, 2011

### **CONCERNING CHRISTIAN UNITY**

James Earl Massey, 1979

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<sup>9</sup>A classic history of the Church of God Movement is John W. V. Smith’s *The Quest for Holiness and Unity* (1980, rev. by Merle Strege, 2009).

<sup>10</sup>See the chapters on holiness and unity in *Forward, Ever Forward!* (2020). Also see Kenneth Jones, *Commitment to Holiness* (1985) and James Earl Massey, *Concerning Christian Unity* (1979).



## 8. VISION OF AN INCLUSIVE CHURCH

Pioneers of the Church of God Movement “saw the church.”<sup>11</sup> It’s Christ’s body that resists artificial human walls that classify, separate, and choose fellowship and leadership on terms other than God’s calling and gifting (Gal. 3:28). There is to be no test of fellowship “other than true Christianity possessed within the heart.”<sup>12</sup> Announced the 1968 General Assembly of the Church of God: “In accordance with the teaching of the Scriptures, the Church of God welcomes fellow Christians without regard to race, color, or national origin, to participate fully and without any reservation in its fellowship and work.”

The 1974 General Assembly made clear that such inclusivism extends to women who are “equipped by their Creator to serve in a variety of roles, and God calls women to use their gifts to their fullest potential. Women should be given consideration for positions of leadership in the total program of the Church of God.”

Reconciliation ministries have been featured in this Movement, countering segregation and discrimination in favor of the redeeming and reuniting grace of God. Commitment to racial reconciliation and gender inclusion is a hallmark of the Church of God. Limits to inclusion for credentialed Church of God ministers are (1) those ethical and lifestyle matters detailed in the Credentials Manual and/or specifically addressed by the General Assembly of the Church of God and (2) the nine teaching distinctives of the Church of God heritage being identified here.

The Body of Christ “is being called to be a Spirit-transformed holy people, a God-sent bridging people, a medium of reconciliation constantly encouraging the free flow of the Spirit’s gifts and ministries among and through all of God’s people on behalf of the whole world.”<sup>13</sup> Song lyrics by Daniel S. Warner, “Beloved how this perfect love unites us all in Jesus.”

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### ***SHE CAME PREACHING***

***(Lillie S. McCutcheon)***

Barry L. Callen, 1992

### ***BEYOND RHETORIC:***

### ***RECONCILIATION AS A WAY OF LIFE***

Samuel G. Hines and Curtiss Paul DeYoung, 2000

### ***AFRICAN-AMERICANS AND THE CHURCH OF GOD***

James Earl Massey, 2005

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<sup>11</sup>See Merle Strege, *I Saw the Church: The Life of the Church of God Told Theologically* (Warner Press, 2000).

<sup>12</sup>Andrew Byers, *Birth of a Reformation* (Gospel Trumpet Co., 1921).

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<sup>13</sup>*Forward, Ever Forward!* (Anderson University Press, Emeth Press, and Mid-America Christian University Press, 2020, by Barry Callen).

## 9. FOCUS ON PRESENT MISSION FAITHFULNESS

Church of God Ministries serves the General Assembly of the Church of God in the United States and Canada by . . .

Empowering the people of God to collectively build a Jesus-centered, biblically-grounded Movement that brings the Kingdom to life on earth as it is in heaven.

Key Phrases Defined:

“the people of God” is the whole of God’s family, people of every nation, ethnicity, culture, and community.

“collectively build” is the development of a Movement with common identity and ambition, always connected to the larger church of God family, pursuing unity in diversity as we move forward.

“Jesus-centered, biblically-grounded” is a Movement of God’s people committed to Jesus above all else, informed and expressed by the divinely inspired and authoritative Scripture.

“the Kingdom” is the way of life, truth, and values of Jesus as He taught and commanded them in this world at His first coming.

Speculation about the details of end-time events should be tempered by humility and disciplined by the clear mandate of Scripture and Jesus himself. Disciples are to focus on the present mission of the church. Resisted must be preoccupations about the future that distract from current ministry faithfulness and reconciliation possibilities. Jesus assured disciples of the future and then directed them to the ministry tasks at hand.

Premillennial and Dispensational plans for interpreting the Book of Revelation, for instance, are to be resisted as questionable biblical interpretations that tend to undercut commitment to present church mission. To be with Christ later calls for being on his mission now. The church is to be formed, informed, and commissioned by Christ’s first coming, not paralyzed in the present by speculative expectations of the particulars of the ultimate tomorrow.

Song lyrics by D. Otis Teasley and F. Dale Bengtson: “To Christ all power on earth is given ... While others dream of an age to come, He’s reigning in our hearts today.” “God through Christ at work within us, In creation will unfold. Life and breath and work and struggle, In this partnership be bold!”

