

Developments in the Churches of God, 1892–1980¹

Norman S. Macdonald

The years following the schism in 1892 from the Open Brethren, which became known as ‘the Separation’, brought to the fore new teachings from the Churches of God (or as they are more commonly known, the Needed Truth).² Certain areas of doctrine which were before held by their teachers in a much broader context were now narrowed down to apply only to themselves. Articles written prior to the schism of 1892 in *Needed Truth*, which had originated as an Open Brethren magazine, indicate that some doctrines had become quite incompatible with the eventual formalized position after 1892.³ The new lines of teaching diminished the original areas of commonality between Churches of God and Open Brethren. The adherents of the new party were made to think of themselves as particular and distinctive from that from which they had separated.

1. This paper is an adapted extract from Norman Macdonald, ‘One Hundred Years of Needed Truth Brethren: A Historical Analysis’, unpublished typescript, 1993, chaps.12 and 15. A copy of the complete typescript is in the University Library of Manchester, Christian Brethren Archive [hereafter CBA], NDC/10/7.

2. For the Churches of God see: C. A. Oxley, ‘The “Needed Truth” Assemblies’, *Christian Brethren Research Fellowship Journal*, No. 4 (Apr. 1964), 21–32; Gordon Willis and Bryan Wilson, ‘The Churches of God: Pattern and Practice’, in Bryan Wilson (ed.), *Patterns of Sectarianism: Organisation and Ideology in Social and Religious Movements* (London, 1967), 244–86; J. J. Park, *The Churches of God: Their Origin and Development in the 20th Century* (Leicester, 1987); Neil T. R. Dickson, *Brethren in Scotland 1838–2000: A Social Study of an Evangelical Movement* (Carlisle, 2002), 158–69; Roger Shuff, *Searching for the True Church: Brethren and Evangelicals in Mid-Twentieth-Century England* (Carlisle, 2005), *passim*; Tim Grass, *Gathering to His Name: The Story of Open Brethren in Britain and Ireland* (Milton Keynes, 2006), 187–93.

3. See the extensive list of quotations from *Needed Truth* [hereafter *NT*] (1888–92) in Macdonald, ‘One Hundred Years’, 11–13.

The following paper illustrates the new lines of teaching after the schism from the Open Brethren, and then two divisions at opposite ends of the twentieth century which raised difficulties for the ecclesiology of the new body.

Doctrinal developments

An area of difficulty for the Churches of God was the membership of the holy priesthood and the royal priesthood. J. A. Boswell, an evangelist and one of the leaders in the schism, indicated in 1895 that he viewed all believers as being in the Holy Priesthood. He states:

a denial of the heavenly priesthood common to all the family of the redeemed, and is in a measure the taking of an anti Christian position—be it also remembered that any priesthood today professing to be superior to the priesthood of all believers is a usurpation of the High Priest's position, and thus a denial of the finished work of Christ, for He as a High Priest sat down at the right hand of God (Hebrews 10: 12).⁴

The Churches of God view changed to an exclusive one that only they occupied the Holy Priesthood and Royal Priesthood. Every other Christian individually and collectively, irrespective of the gifts which had been given to them by the risen Christ, was excluded from these priesthoods. The Open Brethren, from whom the Churches of God had separated, were now no longer in these priesthoods, but were as other Christians in Spiritual Babylon under the rule and devices of Satan. This view is evidenced from articles in *Needed Truth*. For example, David Smith, an evangelist who was one of the founding seceders, writes in the aftermath of the initial secessions:

...the response is small indeed—at first, at least ... Children of God, hopelessly, shall we say? mixed up with the abominations of apostate Christendom. ... All this is sufficiently clear and instructive to lead us to know, and thus preserve us from the device of Satan, used with such complete success toward many at the present time, to blind them as to God's purpose, and to turn them away from His

4. J.A. Boswell, *NT* (1895), 7: 67.

will, who reason, that it were of God, greater and fuller would be the response.⁵

The new teaching was that the Churches of God and they alone as the House of God were presented before the throne of God as a Holy Priesthood offering their sacrifice of praise, and that exclusively.

In the first eight years of the *Needed Truth* magazine, it was clearly taught that the Lord's presence was in the assembly and in particular at the breaking of bread meeting. Scriptural authority was from Matthew 18: 20: 'where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.' Before the Separation, Charles Morton, another of the founding leaders, noted that 'a manifestation of God's present temple then, is to be found wherever any are truly gathered to the Name and such and such alone are by Him constituted "Church of God"'.⁶ The doctrinal line expressed in *Needed Truth* was to change and negate Matthew 18: 20, as the position was to state that they did not believe the Lord's presence and his being in the midst at worship meeting in the manner that other Christians viewed it, but rather that they as the exclusive people of God entered into the presence of God in heaven itself. After the Separation the evangelist Henry Elson maintained that 'He is in the midst in Matt 18, is the Divine centre for the unit as it may exist in a single town or city, which we correctly describe as the assembly of God in such a place'.⁷ It was in essence the Churches of God ground of gathering and the proof of Divine approbation; the absence of Lord's presence marked all other Christian assemblies.

Other believers who imply that the Lord is present in the midst are viewing the verse incorrectly. David Smith of Ayr, writing in *Needed Truth* in 1989, argued that '[s]alvation, baptism and addition were the three basic principles of a church of God':

The testimony of God was thus entrusted to His saints gathered within this divine arrangement, but if a brother or sister refuses to conform to that arrangement or resists the authority of the Lord in a

5. D. Smith, "'Remnant Days': Their History and Lessons', *NT* (1894), 6: 208.

6. C. Morton, 'The House of God Forsaken', *NT* (1890-1), 3: 88.

7. H. Elson, *NT* (1896), 8: 98.

church of God, as shown in Matthew 18, they may forfeit their place in an assembly as one sadly did in the church of God in Corinth (1 Cor. 5:13)...We would therefore conclude that the two or three “gathered together in My Name” imply two or three of the local church of God.⁸

Thus although other Christians are saved, ‘the presence in the midst’ perspective held by other Christian teachers was in error. The first eight years of the magazine indicate that many of the writers regarded all believers as being the people of God. Boswell, for example, laments in 1895: ‘The principles of sectarianism at work today amongst God’s people’.⁹ L. W. G. Alexander, a Scottish solicitor, who was among the leaders in the secession, states in 1895: ‘We deplore the increasing tendency amongst God’s people today to rest satisfied with the knowledge that their sins are forgiven’.¹⁰ There are other examples of the wider view being expressed in various volumes.¹¹ But doctrine in the *Needed Truth* changed and stated that the people of God were only those who were in fellowship with Churches of God assemblies. This view defined that God has two classes on earth today. The higher class are the People of God and the lower class are the Children of God: People of God equates to the Churches of God fellowship; the Children of God equates to all other believers. The Churches of God fellowship would appear to be in control of entry into the Holies through their rules of fellowship and who are owned by God as ‘lampstands’—churches maintaining the truth. It is only their binding into a unity of common agreement that gives an entry into the Most Holy Place of God.

The form of worship service in a Churches of God assembly was for the first ten years similar to an Open Brethren assembly. This meeting, held on Sunday (called ‘the Lord’s day’) began with worship and concluded with the breaking of bread. The hymn book

8. David Smith, ‘Where Two or Three are Gathered’, *NT*, (May, 1989), <<http://www.hayespress.org/article-may-1989-where-two-or-three-are-gathered>>, accessed 29 July 2015.

9. J. A. Boswell, *NT* (1895), 7: 65.

10. L. W. G. Alexander, *NT* (1895), 7: 185

11. *NT* (1892–3) 5: 3; *NT* (1895), 7: 116; *NT* (1896), 8: 58.

used at this meeting from 1892 to 1909 was the *Open Brethren Believers Hymn Book* (1884). By 1909 the worship meeting had changed in three quite significant ways compared to the Open Brethren. Firstly, the breaking of bread was now uniformly held at the beginning of the meeting. Boswell in December 1896 stated: ‘We believe that the breaking of bread should occupy an early position in the coming together, and not be deferred, as is often the case, until near the close of the meeting’.¹² The possible reason for the change was to emphasize the emerging new doctrine which John Montgomerie, one of the leaders in the Vernalite secession of the Churches of God (to be discussed in the next section), called the ‘doctrine of approach’.¹³ This new teaching emphasized the uniqueness of entering into the Holies that belonged exclusively to the Churches of God fellowship. The ‘entering in’ occurred after the bread and wine had been taken and although this is the official view, there are a few overseers who would differ in this matter. The bringing of the emblems forward to the beginning of the service would be required to accommodate this new line of thinking.¹⁴

The Scripture used to justify this view is Hebrews 10: 19–22—having ‘boldness to enter the holiest by the blood of Jesus’. Although it is given as the explanation for such a view, there is no exposition given as to how it is known that this entrance took place after the bread and wine had been taken. In the matter of worship it is an absolute doctrine that the Churches of God alone enter in as a Holy Priesthood to offer up spiritual sacrifices to the High Priest over the House of God. All other believers are excluded.¹⁵ The worship meeting, like all other meetings, has only the men taking part and consists of hymns and prayers after the bread and wine have been taken. Secondly, a further change in worship was the ‘pouring of the

12. J. A. Boswell, *NT* (1896), 8: 236.

13. John Montgomerie, *Open Brethren Principles: An Examination and Review, Also a Brief Statement of “Needed Truth” Error with an Appeal for a Return to the Old Paths* (Inverness, n.d.), 53.

14. [J. M. Gault], *The Breaking of the Bread* (1984; 2nd ed., Royal Wootton Bassett, Swindon, 2012), 20–1.

15. *Ibid.*, 30–2.

cup'.¹⁶ Initially there were differences between Churches of God, and many assemblies did not pour out the cup after thanksgiving had been given but had it outpoured prior to the remembrance service commencing.¹⁷ This variation in assembly practice was still occurring by 1906. Time was eventually to bring uniformity of practice with the outpouring occurring after the thanksgiving had been given. Finally, the worship changed with the abandoning of the *Believers Hymn Book* in 1909 and the introduction of the new hymnbook, *Psalms, Hymns and Spiritual Songs for the Use of the Churches of God*, which again emphasized the claim of Churches of God of being the one and only thing for God on earth today.

The Churches of God doctrine on redemption was similar to that held by the wider Brethren community. The early Brethren followed the theology of the eighteenth and nineteenth century teachers in the matter of redemption. D. L. Moody accused Darby of being an extreme Calvinist at a series of Bible readings in Chicago when Darby stated 'It is not of him that willeth ... but of God that sheweth mercy'. Moody would counter by stating 'Whosoever will' is the great gospel invitation.¹⁸ The Churches of God had a Calvinistic view concerning salvation. The editors of *Needed Truth* stated in its first year of publishing and before the Separation that 'Free grace calls sinners to Repentance, yea, commands all men everywhere to repent. Sovereign grace gives Repentance to those with whom it deals personally and directly, and withholds it from those it leaves without such dealing. This the Spirit of God calls the-election of Grace'.¹⁹ John Brown, who had led the first secession of the Churches of God which had taken place in Greenock in Renfrewshire, states: 'The Church which is the Body of Christ. Into that the Living One alone brings, and of it Christ Himself is the Preserver'.²⁰ Brown again states 'though certain expounders of

16. [Gault], *Breaking of the Bread*, 21.

17. CBA 2116, Thomas McLaren, *A Recent Correspondence. T. M'Laren—J. Allan* [Marked 'Private.'](n.pl., [?1906]), 2–3.

18. H. A. Ironside, *A Historical Sketch of the Brethren Movement* (1945) rpt. (Neptune, NJ, 1985), 81.

19. Editors, 'Repentance', *NT* (1888–9), 1: 106.

20. J. Brown, "'Things that Differ'", *NT* (1890–1), 3: 11.

scripture assert otherwise, no scripture can be cited that says or implies that man puts into Christ'.²¹ Boswell also states:

We live in an age that is seeking to set aside the sovereign will of God. The very gospel that is preached to the sinner has often little of the righteousness of God and His just requirements in it. Men who have never been made the subjects of the Spirit's conviction of sin are urged only to believe, and then, too often on a light profession of faith, without repentance, are hurried into a Church fellowship²²

In a later article Boswell also wrote: 'Whether it be the restoration of Israel, the salvation of a sinner, or the deliverance of a saint, it will ever be found that wherever there is true work of God He will have given repentance'.²³ The revealing of salvation through his will became an important issue in the new fellowship. Election was within a short time to become a matter of considerable importance with regard to church fellowship. A new doctrinal line was introduced stating that no one could be joined to this new fellowship unless repentance had been given by God as to all wrongs in the previous Christian associations the applicant may have had.²⁴ This doctrine was to become known within Churches of God as the 'second calling' and had the sovereignty of God as its doctrinal base. Christians in the Churches of God had in effect received two callings—the first at salvation and the second at reception into the church of God locally, as defined by the Churches of God fellowship.

In prophecy the Churches of God generally followed that taught by J. N. Darby, as did the majority of Brethren teachers throughout the world. To view the Church the Body, not the local church in prophecy, was the basis of Darby's understanding of prophecy. This view was the one almost totally shared by the rest of the Brethren movement. It does however create a problem for the Churches of God as they had a vision of themselves receiving a special portion

21. *Ibid.*, 12.

22. J. A. Boswell, 'The Revelation of the Lord. III. The church in Pergamon', *NT* (1890-1), 3: 159-160.

23. J.A. Boswell, *NT* (1895), 7: 111.

24. *NT* (1895), 7: 109,112.

because of their standing in ecclesiastical matters. Boswell states ‘When He comes into His Kingdom those who have for the time being separated even from their brethren in seeking to be faithful followers of their Lord, will come in with Him, and be remembered by Him, we believe in a special way’.²⁵ Here is a new doctrine—teaching that there is a ‘special blessing’ for the Churches of God assemblies in a future day. The special blessing is because they stood for being the only true collective Church for God on earth. There would be, however, a number of members would not hold this view of special blessing.

The ecclesiology of Churches of God has as its primary foundation that they only are the ‘true’ Church for worship and service and all other Christian groupings are ‘false’. These false systems cannot use the terms ‘Church of God’ or ‘Assembly of God’ to apply to their circle of members. Such a title can only apply to those churches within the Churches of God fellowship. They aver that no churches of God can be formed without their knowledge, as God would not permit this to happen. Churches of God can only be planted through the outworking of the labours of those within their fellowship. Virtually all the New Testament promises for gathered-together Christians are taken to apply exclusively to themselves. All other believers are in a sort of ‘no man’s land’ completely undefined according to Churches of God line of teaching. In the view of Churches of God, with regard to the collective service and care of these companies of Christians, they are in a sense abandoned, having no God-recognised elders and shepherds.

A movement whose beginning was to stress one area of doctrine has taken the path of many other such groups by creating justification of the stance taken and moving from point of difference to schism. It then highlights the areas of difference and minimises areas of commonality between the protesting group and the original group from whence it sprung. There had been a desire in *Needed Truth* at the outset to join with other Christian magazines and fellow teachers, but after the schism of 1892 the magazine presented solely the views of a party.

25. J.A. Boswell, ‘Remnant Times’, *NT* (1892–3), 5: 5.

Divisions

During the early years of the new movement there were problems of definition for key biblical positions. Some members were not to be persuaded from much of the original Brethren teachings and viewed some of the statements printed in the *Needed Truth* magazine with censure. A need for concise government between assemblies was recognized by all in the new movement. It began making claims that only those who were in this fellowship were 'in the Lord'; 'in the Kingdom of God'; 'in the people of God'; 'in Zion'; 'in the one thing for God'; 'lampstands'. But this had become unacceptable to many who had originally separated.

Some members, and even complete assemblies, were beginning to question the division that had separated them from so many assemblies in the Open Brethren. From the evidence in the magazine, *Needed Truth*, it is evident that a considerable number of brethren and sisters returned to the fellowship of Open Brethren assemblies. Among the leaders who eventually returned were L. W. G. Alexander and John Brown. In certain occasions complete assemblies returned to the Open Brethren, such as happened at Blackburn in Lancashire, and such a return was an acknowledgement of their error in the schism of 1892.²⁶ However, in the Vernal division of 1904 and the divorce division of 1980 the dissenters created new fellowships which still held some of the claims of the original movement.

Vernal, 1904

The Churches of God came to have five oversight circles, from that of the local assembly through three geographical circles (district, country, and worldwide), to that of the ultimate circle of leading brethren. The Vernalite division highlighted different understandings of the responsibility of these circles after the Separation of 1892. In 1901 a problem in the Ayr assembly caused a disagreement between the local overseers. The five overseers, including the evangelist Frank Vernal, were of one mind on a discipline judgment when the

26. CBA, 2101, Fred Grundy et al., an open letter on behalf of about 50 saints in Lancashire, &c. [Blackburn] (n.pl. [1899]); Dickson, *Brethren in Scotland*, 170–1.

matter was brought before the church, but when objections were raised, two of the overseers changed their judgment. As all the local overseers were not of one mind, this created a test for the new fellowship as to the principles to be enacted in such a situation. The view of the three overseers was that they were responsible for the flock of God for whose oversight God had entrusted them. Such a responsibility demanded action when Scripture enjoined them to act and the majority view was sufficient ground to move forward in this judgment. The judgment was given to the Ayr assembly, but as the two dissenting overseers refused to agree, a division resulted in that assembly. The issue of collective responsibility was to be a keen area of debate which resulted in a major division for the movement. In Scotland the majority of overseers agreed with the action taken by the majority decision of overseers in the Ayr assembly.

The situation became more acute through a difficulty which arose in the Church of God in Stenhousemuir in Stirlingshire during this period. This involved J. A. Boswell being disciplined by the overseers in the assembly. The reason for this was due to his long periods of absence from it. The district oversight upheld the action of the Stenhousemuir assembly, but this was in fact overturned by the leading circle of brethren.²⁷ The basis of this was that it is only the leading Brethren circle who can discipline one of their own number, not the local assembly with whom he is numbered. This intervention was crucial and became an almost hidden factor in the deliberations and actions of the overseers in England, Wales, and Ireland with respect to the difficulties in Scotland during the period 1901 to May 1904. The intervention of the overseers in England into the decision of the Scottish oversight began on 27 December 1902 when a meeting was held in Nottingham to discuss the divided mind in Scotland. The meeting concluded by sending out a letter offering assistance through the sending of four brethren up to Scotland to investigate the problem in Ayr assembly. The result of this investigation was put to the Scottish oversight at a conference held in Glasgow on 11 September 1903 where there was a measured agreement for a solution to the local difficulty in the Ayr assembly.

27. Park, *Churches of God*, 87.

There was however an added caveat that there should be another conference to discuss the possible doctrinal differences between the Scottish brethren and the views of those overseers from England. The follow-up conference was held in Glasgow on the 2–4 January 1904 where six doctrines were to be discussed. The majority of the Scottish brethren would not accept the following positions:

5th. Does the responsibility to receive into or put out from the circle of Overseers reside in the circle of Overseers in a town or in that country or district?

6th. When Overseers in a given circle have a difficulty in becoming of one mind in the Lord, the next larger circle of Overseers should come in to assist in producing the desired oneness of mind in the Lord.²⁸

A meeting for representatives of overseers from England, Wales and Ireland was arranged for 2 April 1904 at Birkenhead to discuss the crisis in Scotland. It would appear that a strategy was formulated at this meeting when it was seen that there was no dissent from within their own ranks, to be employed with respect to the Scottish oversight. A letter was sent out to the Scottish oversight on 2 April 1904 in which it was stated: ‘Having at this representative meeting of overseers in England and Wales and Ireland unanimously arrived, in the fear of God, at certain important conclusions, we have asked some of our number to go to Scotland and convey by word of mouth our united mind.’²⁹ Since its inception the matter of geography was important to Churches of God thinking for district and national elderhoods. The geographical boundaries of England, Wales, and Ireland having representative overseers being of one mind are used as a basis to overtake the scriptural rationale held by the Scottish oversight. The first volumes of *Needed Truth* sought to give justification for having a united oversight based on the Roman

28. CBA 2102, quoted in James Gibson et al., untitled circular pamphlet signed by 117 Scottish brethren, Glasgow, August 1904, 3; and in Napoleon Noel, *The History of the Brethren* (2 vols; Denver CO, 1936), 1: 276.

29. A. T. Doodson, *Search for the Truth of God* (Bradford [1947]), 59–60.

administrative structure.³⁰ The interpretation of the ‘the flock’ in Peter’s epistle to being ‘the total Church fellowship’ was the ground used to give supposed authority for external overseers to have a direct part in the judgments of an assembly which would be equal to those of the local overseers. If the United Kingdom had been one nation and having one circle of overseers then the action by those at the Birkenhead conference would not have been possible as the majority of UK Overseers were in Scotland. The Scottish Oversight refused to meet with the four delegated men sent up from England, and they refused to recognize the offer of help from the Birkenhead conference. For the Scottish Oversight the problem was in Scotland and they had responsibility for its solution. The four delegated brethren set out the doctrinal requirements that had to be accepted by the Scottish brethren. Firstly, God has given to some overseers a larger share of responsibility than to others. This principle must find its expression in the joint acting of overseers. Secondly, when overseers in a church of God have a difficulty in becoming of one mind in the Lord, the overseers in the district should come in to assist in producing the desired oneness of mind in the Lord. Similar responsibility rests on overseers in wider circles. Thirdly, apart from due subjection of overseers to one another and in particular, apart from practical recognition that each smaller circle of overseers is a part of a larger whole, the Fellowship cannot continue to exist, but must in time become disintegrated. Fourthly, it is impossible to have fellowship in oversight work or in ministry with brethren who are not prepared to carry out these principles.³¹

On 21 May 1904 a meeting was convened to discuss these points with the Scottish brethren, but only a minority responded. When the four points became known to the dissenters they expressed strong exception to them. The end result for the Churches of God was that the membership was reduced by nearly thirty-five per cent within six weeks from 21 May 1904. The Scottish situation was finalised at a meeting of the Overseers from England, Wales, and Ireland on 8–11 July 1904 in Glasgow. The division in July 1904 created a loss of

30. A. J. Holiday, *et al.*, ‘The Fellowship of Assemblies’, *NT*, 2 (1889-90), 49–76.

31. Doodson, *Search for the Truth*, 55–63.

thirty-three Churches of God and 114 Overseers in Scotland, plus a number outside Scotland.³² The May 1904 decision by representative Overseers in England, Wales and Ireland to bar Scottish brethren from the public platform and displace them as overseers from their own assemblies was the final straw to many of these teaching brethren. To disenfranchise the Scottish overseers was in a measure to create a division. Defensive papers were issued by both sides seeking to demonstrate why they had acted as they had.³³

There were difficulties in England over the issue of collective responsibility and the elderhood. There had been other criticisms of a united elderhood by two of the early leaders, Charles Morton and Rice Thomas Hopkins, who argued that Acts 15 did not provide a basis for it, which had not been answered. The issue had still to be addressed by the leaders of the movement.³⁴ The crisis in Scotland was to become the crossing of the Rubicon. The critics of Churches of God believed the division was evidence of the warnings that they had given against them. The serious aspect for the movement would be the doctrinal position of oneness of mind before overseers could act. This fixed position was to result in a passive direction for spiritual activity and minimising any emerging charismatic leadership that may have come from gifted brethren. The need for oneness of mind would create seeds for future discord when another difficulty arose within the movement.

Attempts at reconciliation between the two fellowships of the Churches of God have been made. What continued to divide them could be seen from a letter of written in 1906 by Thomas McLaren jnr., one of the Vernalite leaders:

Now that time has cooled some matters, and the dust of battle has settled, are you satisfied that vital truth keeps us apart? On the

32. Park, *Churches of God*, 28.

33. For example: from the Vernalite Churches of God there was Gibson et al., untitled pamphlet, Glasgow, August 1904; on the Needed Truth Churches of God side; 'A Record of Divine Deliverance', *NT* (1905), 17: appendix.

34. Charles Morton, 'Overseers and their Work', *NT* (Apr. 1898), 10: 93; R[ice]. T[homas]. H[opkins]., Notes on comments made by the editors of "N[eeded] T[ruth]" on C. Morton's paper on rule (Lenton, 1898).

matter of the new birth; baptism; churches of God; divine call of overseers; Lord in the midst; Lord's coming; standing in the world etc., I think we are more or less agreed. Are there other matters which compel separation the one from the other? There is of course the pouring out of the cup. Then of course, we could not accept, as of the Lord, the coming into a lesser circle uninvited of overseers from a larger circle. We could not accept the idea some seem to hold of a diminishing circle of overseers up through the various circles from the local church, through the county, country, and countries, until at the top, the chief power rests with a handful of men. We could not agree to the act of a church or churches being set aside by others outside of them.³⁵

A meeting for reconciliation was arranged in Glasgow on 17 March 1906. It was fruitless. No further attempts were made until the 1960s and again in 1978, but again both of these efforts resulted in failure.³⁶

Divorce 1980

The Churches of God fellowship had a doctrinal position on divorce that has been similar historically to the main Brethren movement. This was that divorce was unacceptable for those who were members of the Churches of God.

For non-Christians who were divorced there could be reception into the assembly after the person became a Christian, but this would depend on the grounds of the divorce and with the added restriction that the person could not remarry after becoming a member of the assembly. One of the key issues on divorce for all Christian movements was what is known as the excepting clause. The exception referred to is in Matthew 19: 9: 'And I say unto you, Whosoever shall put away his wife, except it be for fornication, and shall marry another, committeth adultery: and whosoever marrieth her which is put away doth commit adultery'. At the time of the inception of the Churches of God, society in general did not perceive divorce as a desirable option and the established churches did not

35. Thos. M'Laren to James Allan, 22 January 1906, in M'Laren, *A Recent Correspondence*, 2.

36. Park, *Churches of God*, 28.

allow it to occur within its membership. The whole culture of that time was to accept the sanctity of the marriage vows and to strongly disapprove of the minority in society who may have been divorced. After the First World War there was a marked alteration in values, and divorce became much more widespread, with some mainstream churches changing ground on the issue. In 1903 C. M. Luxmoore, the leading individual in the Churches of God after the Separation, gave his view concerning divorce and the excepting clause:

We look at this passage to note the positive and unmistakable way in which the Lord proclaims the sanctity and permanence of marital tie. The provision that Moses had been bidden to make was a provision for hard hearts. Else nothing could break the bond save only fornication. That is to say, if the obligation of faithfulness which marriage imposes equally on both are disregarded by one, this and this alone will serve as a ground for the dissolution of the bond, and act as death acts in breaking the legal tie and liberating from its obligation.³⁷

Luxmoore restated this view in when his exposition was published as *Bible Readings on the Gospels* (1927).³⁸ In 1925 at a conference of overseers the matter was debated for the first time with the discussion led by Joshua Hawkins a schoolteacher from Halifax in Yorkshire and a founding member of the Church of God there. The conclusion of that conference was that the matter required further discussion. In 1946 divorce was again discussed at conference, with George Prasher senior, a Scottish Churches of God evangelist, following the line initially set out by Luxmoore. At this conference the debate brought out the divergence of mind in overseers concerning divorce. In 1947 another evangelist, John Miller, who by then was extremely influential in the Fellowship, challenged the Luxmoore view when the matter came under discussion at oversight conference. At this conference the status quo was reversed and the doctrine for divorce was seen in the epistles for those who were members in the Churches of God. Millar argued that Matthew 19: 9 does have an application,

37. C. M. Luxmoore, 'Bible Readings on the Gospels', *NT*, 15:157.

38. C. M. Luxmoore, *Bible Readings on the Gospels* (London, 1927), 128.

but only to the non-Christian. The conference now adopted a clear stance on divorce:

Firstly, on the high ground proper to the people of God, we recognize that the word of God is applicable to them regards the marriage bond as indissoluble except by death; that separation may be permissible, though with reconciliation as an objective pleasing to the Lord, but that divorce is not permissible, and in the case of the innocent party who has been divorced, remarriage is not allowable.

Secondly, Matthew 19 verse 9 finds an application in the case of an unsaved man, divorcing his wife for fornication, who marries again prior to his conversion. Such a man cannot be regarded as living in sin and can be accepted for fellowship. However if such a man did not remarry after his divorce, he should be made to understand, that henceforth he comes under the same rule of conduct as others in Fellowship and must remain unmarried during the lifetime of his wife.³⁹

The decision of 1947 was widely known by the membership, but there would appear to have been considerable ignorance of the previous viewpoints held by Luxmoore and Prasher. This lack of awareness perhaps was one source of the resultant division of 1980.

In 1976 a divorce working group was set up which was to report back to the annual oversight conference. This was duly done in 1977 and the matter was debated with an apparent desire to move forward to a new position.⁴⁰ In 1978 a major change for the movement was to be ratified at this conference with the previous viewpoint held since 1947 now disowned. The exception clause was dropped and reception of the divorced 'for any cause', whilst a non-Christian, was now permissible. There was strong disagreement in the oversight on the matter. To allow the legislation through, many overseers had to follow the subjection principle, which is to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace and to be ready always to be in subjection

39. Writer's collection, British Isles Overseers Conference (1947).

40. Writer's collection, British Isles Overseers Conference (1977).

to one another with particular reference to those in higher spheres of responsibility. The situation was in many ways analogous to the trouble seventy-four years previously with the Vernal division. For the conference of 1978, oneness of mind was again of matter of high principle. It would appear to have strained overseers' scriptural understanding of divorce. The crucial question that required to be faced was where was the priority of principle to be: the primacy of the word of God and its authority or the secondary derived framework of oneness of mind? Once again the movement seems to have gone along the route of united mind, allied to subjection, at all costs, thereby straining the conscience of those who found the scriptural authority a higher claim.

The conference of December 1978 provided a period of two years prior to implementation of the reception of divorced persons under 'any clause'. In 1979 the facts of the decision were given to the members via the movement's *Intelligence* newsletter of March.⁴¹ The matter was again on the agenda at the conference held later that year. At the conference there was strong disagreement, with a united mind being expressed by one district against the conference decision of December 1978. The conference maintained the view arrived at the previous year but this was once again achieved on the basis of subjection to apparently create a supposed united mind of overseers to the saints.⁴² After the conference there were clearly differences of mind with the dissent being centred in Scotland. Circulars were issued by dissenters to indicate the error of the proposed implementation. In a letter to leading brethren one dissenter stated: 'subjection under pressure makes for uniformity, not unity'.⁴³ In December 1979 and March 1980 two key papers were sent out to overseers by the dissenters.⁴⁴ The former paper was regarded as an

41. *Intelligence* (Mar. 1979).

42. Writer's collection, British Isles Overseers Conference (1979).

43. Writer's collection, Muriel Oxley to leading brethren, Feb. 1980.

44. Writer's collection, A. B. Robertson, et al., 'Reception into fellowship of persons divorced and re-married prior to conversion Dec., 1979; 'Decisions taken on divorce—an Appraisalment' Mar. 1980.

open challenge by the leading brethren who responded in a paper of February 1980.⁴⁵

This resulted in the dissenters' second paper which remained unanswered by leading brethren. The dissenters in the March 1980 paper stated:

There is little doubt that the Churches of God have taken an elitist position among Brethren movements. This claim was qualified as relating to the Fellowship's understanding of such things as the Churches of God, the House of God, the Kingdom of God and the Holy Priesthood. These concepts have certainly elevated the service of those in the House of God to a very high plane.⁴⁶

In this the dissenters were not disagreeing with the position but rather using this high ground as an argument against the reception of divorced persons being a dilution of the holiness required within the membership. The banning of all discussion created discord, and the lack of communication, plus authoritarian directives by the leadership, were likely to precipitate division. The paper of March 1980 indicated this frustration: 'The general trend has been to keep saints in ignorance and to discourage discussion'.⁴⁷ This paper also highlighted the difficulty created in the divorce debate by historical decisions taken when Christians were received into West African assemblies where there was the problem of multiple wives. Here decisions were taken that did not take account of the views of overseeing brethren outside the immediate decision makers concerned with mission in West Africa.

Absolute unity could not be attained in this controversial matter of divorce, and if some decision were to be arrived at, then something would have to give. On 13 April 1980 the leadership responded to the dissenting paper of March 1980 through a conference decision to send assemblies a circular letter. The letter stated: 'Strong exception

45. Writer's collection, 'Overseeing Brethren Circular. Decisions on Divorce, Dec. 1978', Feb. 1980.

46. Writer's collection, A. B. Robertson, et al., 'Reception into fellowship of persons. Divorced and re-Married prior to conversion' (March 1980) Paper 2.

47. Ibid.

was taken to individuals (or even districts) sending out circulars on doctrinal issues. The proper procedure is for such matters to be discussed within the assembly then the district, and finally this conference. No individual has the right to circularise other saints as to his special view'.⁴⁸ This letter of April 1980 appeared to stimulate discussion and achieved the opposite effect from that intended. A private meeting was held in Glasgow on 17 May 1980 which was attended by many members who had had difficulty in accepting the 1978 conference decision. The response by the leadership in Scotland was to read a circular to each assembly on 1 June 1980:

saints should be advised against attending any meetings of this sort or of being persuaded to sign any statement which would involve leaving the fellowship. Overseers cannot too strongly emphasise the danger in following a course in which they might ultimately be led outside the house of God. Overseers have with sorrow to inform the assembly that on this issue a letter has been received signed by the majority of the saints in the little assembly in Whitehills [Aberdeenshire], withdrawing from the Fellowship.⁴⁹

The situation was now becoming acute as to how widespread this division could become, as a considerable number of the membership had indicated their dissatisfaction with the seemingly highhanded way the matter was dealt with. The matter of ownership of halls was urgently looked into by the leadership of the movement. The nomination of trusteeship to only local assembly brethren could result in legal debate as to who were the rightful owners of these assets. Should a majority of trustees in a local assembly be the dissenters in this dispute then they may be the rightful owners of the property. Such a dispute did in effect arise at this time in the assembly in Paisley. In 1981 approximately 100 members left the movement and four new assemblies were created by the division.⁵⁰

48. Writer's collection, Circular letter British Isles Oversight (April 1980).

49. Writer's collection, Letter to saints from Scottish Oversight, 1 June 1980.

50. Park, Churches of God, 29, however, states 'about 80 persons'.

Approximately twenty-five overseers resigned but continued in Churches of God fellowship. J. J. Park states: ‘These losses were particularly distressing because brethren and sisters with whom we had served the Lord for many years no longer felt able to continue with us.’⁵¹ The majority who left gathered as Church and Churches of God and were a rival to the main movement. A minority of those who left went to the Open Brethren. The new splinter movement was to experience within a few years their own difficulties with some influential figures leaving and seeking fellowship with the Open Brethren. Some others joined with the Vernalite fellowship.

Conclusion

In the first four years of the magazine, *Needed Truth*, from 1888 until 1892, the editors and contributors accepted existing assemblies in the Open Brethren were legitimate churches of God owned by God as lampstands. This gave way after the Separation to a series of exclusive claims which claimed biblical positions that applied only to themselves: kingdom of God, people of God, church of God, churches of God, the house of God, the elect race, the holy nation, the holy priesthood, the royal priesthood, the temple of God, and in the Lord.⁵² Exogamous marriages and attendance at Open Brethren services, or that of any other Christian body, are excommunicable offences.⁵³ Gordon Willis and Bryan Wilson state:

Overseers assert the increased sufficiency of the literature from the movement’s own publishing office, and every change in *Needed Truth* has intended to re-emphasize its adequacy for the entire religious needs of the saints. Thus the separation of the Churches of God from the Brethren has become profound,

51. Ibid.

52. *The Search for the Truth of God: The New Testament Answer in Churches of God* (1991; 3rd ed., Leicester, 2004), Appendix, ii–iii, iv. This book is an updated version Doodson’s earlier book of the same title; no author is given on the title page, but there is a foreword by J. D Terrell and J. M. Gault.

53. Writer’s collection, Scottish Overseers to Scottish members, 8 April 1923; Macdonald, ‘One Hundred Years’, 62.

and the movement has long had a confirmed sense of its own distinctive identity.⁵⁴

Divisions are difficult to eradicate when the grounds of fellowship are as 'tablets of stone' chiselled by past leaders of the Churches of God movement. In each of the divisions the members sought to honour the principles which they believed were paramount. Defining fellowship in a less rigid way, and more in tune with the example of the churches of Revelation, could have saved the Churches of God from some of their internal divisions.⁵⁵ Such a stance, however, would highlight their own schism from Open Brethren in 1892. The problem can be seen in the comments of the leading brethren after the Vernalite Churches of God secession: 'Unless each and every Church of God receives and puts away on the same principles and criteria, agreed fellowship wide, the movement, the House of God, we love so much will be at an end. The issues are as grave as this'.⁵⁶ When difficulties arise, however, it would appear to be much safer ground to struggle with the theology to obtain a scriptural mandate, rather than confusing the issue by having overseers to agree for legislation to pass. This latter practice may meet a principle of uniformity, but at a cost of weakening the higher principle of the authority of Scripture and thereby straining the individual Christian conscience.

54. Willis and Wilson, 'The Churches of God', 255 n.

55. For the view of that the churches in Revelation lacked a united oversight, see C. M. Luxmoore, 'The Church in Ephesus', *NT* (1890–1), 3:177.

56. 'A record of divine deliverance', *NT*, (1905), 17: appendix.

