

CHANGES IN THE SPIRIT: EXAMINING THE ADAPTATION OF SCRIPTURE
INTERPRETATION IN THE CHURCH OF GOD: 1971 to 1993

by

Anthony Jason Bradley

A thesis submitted to the faculty
of The University of North Carolina at Charlotte
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts in
Religious Studies

Charlotte, NC

2010

Approved by:

Dr. Sean P. McCloud

Dr. John C. Reeves

Dr. Julia Robinson-Harmon

©2010
Anthony Jason Bradley
ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

ABSTRACT

ANTHONY JASON BRADLEY. *Changes in Spirit: Examining the adaptation of scripture interpretation in the Church of God: 1971 to 1993* (Under the direction of DR. SEAN P MCCLOUD)

This purpose of this thesis is to demonstrate the change in scriptural interpretation of the Church of God Cleveland Tennessee in respect to major tenants of the Pentecostal Tradition. I also aim to show through the use of the Evangelical Commentary Sunday School Lessons that the Church of God demonstrates a great deal of adaptability to the contemporary period. The chapters will examine major themes in the church doctrine and the use of the scriptures that each Sunday school lesson uses. The first chapter will concentrate on the creation narrative of Genesis. I will argue that the adaptability of the denomination allows an understanding of science while a literal interpretation of the scriptures is still used. The second chapter will concentrate on prophecy concerning the end of days. I will argue that the denomination still understands these prophecies to be literal, but an adaptation on how they should be interpreted by the adherent within the church. The third chapter will examine the doctrine of “faith healing” within the Church of God. I will argue that the Church of God has adopted medical science in the interpretation of the scriptures. The fourth and fifth chapters will examine changes in the message from the Church of God to its adherents involving wealth and prosperity and leadership within the church. I argue that these changes show how the interpretation of scripture has changed to be acceptable to more educated and affluent converts to the doctrine of the Church of God.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION	1
1.1 Goals of the Study	2
1.2 History and Scholarship of Pentecostalism	3
1.3 Introduction to Mickey Crews' Work	5
CHAPTER 2: EXPLANATION OF MATERIAL	9
2.1 Outline of the Lessons	10
2.2 Benefits of the Lesson Structure	14
CHAPTER 3: THE CREATION NARRATIVE	16
3.1 1971 Evangelical Commentary on Genesis	17
3.2 1977 Evangelical Commentary on Genesis	18
3.3 Concluding Thoughts on the Creation Narrative	21
CHAPTER 4: REVELATION AND APOCALYPTIC PROPHECY	23
4.1 1978 Evangelical Commentary on Revelation	24
4.2 1985 Evangelical Commentary on Revelation	28
4.3 1992 Evangelical Commentary on Revelation	30
4.4 Concluding Thoughts on Revelation and Prophecy	31

CHAPTER 5: FAITH HEALING	33
5.1 1972 Evangelical Commentary on Faith Healing	34
5.2 1979 – 1980 Evangelical Commentary on Faith Healing	37
5.3 1991 – 1992 Evangelical Commentary on Faith Healing	38
5.4 Concluding Thoughts on Faith Healing	40
CHAPTER 6: FINANCES AND ECONOMIC PROSPERITY IN THE CHURCH OF GOD	41
6.1 1973 Evangelical Commentary on Stewardship and Wealth	42
6.2 1982 Evangelical Commentary on Stewardship and Wealth	47
6.2 1989 Evangelical Commentary on Stewardship and Wealth	50
6.3 Concluding Thoughts on Stewardship and Wealth	53
CHAPTER 7: CHURCH LEADERSHIP THROUGH THE DECADES	54
7.1 1974 Evangelical Commentary on Church Leadership	55
7.2 1987 – 1988 Evangelical Commentary on Church Leadership	58
7.3 Concluding Thoughts on Church Leadership	60
CHAPTER 8: CONCLUSIONS	62
BIBLIOGRAPHY	65

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The history and origins of the Pentecostal movement and one of its oldest, largest, and fastest growing Holiness Pentecostal denominations, the Church of God (Cleveland, TN), have long been favored topics among American religious historians and sociology scholars, with a growth in the amount of works published since the late Seventies.¹ The extraordinary popularity and subsequent growth of the Pentecostal movement, coupled with the fascinating practices of ecstatic trance, glossolalia, and prophetic interpretation, have made the Pentecostalism the subject of much scholarly literature over the past half century. As scholars of American religion have focused attention on how religious groups adapt and change over time, Pentecostalism while has provided cases studies.² While known as one of the most theologically conservative denominations in American Protestantism, the leadership of the Church of God, seizing upon the popularity of the healing and charismatic revivals of the late 1940s and early 1950s, has adapted and changed its practices and ideas over time while simultaneously working to keep what it sees to be the core of their theology. In his examination of the early American Pentecostal Movement, Heaven Below, Grant Wacker suggested that, “the genius of the Pentecostal movement lay in its ability to hold two seemingly

¹ Mickey Crews, *The Church of God a Social History* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1990), 1. David Harrell, *All Things Are Possible: The Healing and Charismatic Revivals in Modern America* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1978). Weston La Barre, *The Shall Take Up Serpents: Psychology of the Southern Snake Handling Cult* (New York, Schocken Books, 1962).

² Margaret M. Poloma, *The Assemblies of God at the Crossroads* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1989).

incompatible impulses in pragmatic tension.”³ Wacker calls these impulses “the primitive and the pragmatic.”⁴ As in Wacker’s work, these ideas will become more nuanced throughout as my arguments are made but he understands them to simply be thought of as “idealism versus realism, or principle versus practicality.”⁵ The Church of God, like all evangelical denominations, adopted change to the interpretation of the scriptures, and I aim to demonstrate these changes throughout the period. Throughout all of the social changes in 1960s to the 1980s the Church of God retained its values while appealing to the surrounding society.

1.1: Goals of the Study

In this thesis, I examine the Church of God, (Cleveland, TN), with Wacker’s dual tensions in mind. Through an examination of the Evangelical Commentaries, I will argue that the Church of God has shown a great deal of flexibility in its interpretation of the Holy Scriptures in the contemporary period and a rapidly shifting society. This change has served to continue a trend noticed by Mickey Crews, Grant Wacker, and other scholars who have studied the Church of God and the Pentecostal movement. I also will demonstrate how even in the face of these changes the Church of God has kept its literal interpretation of the scriptures. For the remainder of this introduction I will briefly explore the Pentecostal movement’s origins and beliefs, the scholarship associated with the Pentecostal movement, and a discussion on Mickey Crews’ work as it serves an important role in the evidence for my findings.

³ Grant Wacker, *Heaven Below: Early Pentecostals and American Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 10.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

1.2: The History and Scholarship of Pentecostalism

The Pentecostal Movement has roots that date back to the nineteenth century Holiness movement.⁶ The Holiness movement can be characterized by literal minded scripture interpretation, emotional fervor, enmity towards ecclesiasticism and most importantly a belief in the “Second Blessing” theology.⁷ The “Second Blessing” theology is a Wesleyan term referring to a distinct, second event following a salvation experience of conversion that makes the convert free from voluntary sins. The Pentecostal movement itself has its earliest American manifestations with the followers of Charles Fox Parham began in 1901 as the Apostolic Faith movement, and eventually spreading across the country.⁸ Early revivals and meetings of like-minded early Pentecostals occurred at Bethel College under Parham and more famously in Los Angeles at the Azusa Street Mission on April Eighteenth 1906 under Parham’s African American protégé, William Joseph Seymour.⁹ In the years that followed the early Pentecostal leadership would go on to “stump” across the country preaching in store fronts, warehouses, schools, and anywhere else they could rent space.¹⁰ Eventually some of the leadership would land in the rugged mountain country of Eastern Tennessee and Western North Carolina.¹¹

⁶ Mapes Anderson, *Vision of the Disinherited: The Making of American Pentecostalism*, (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1979), 28.

⁷ Wacker10.

⁸ Anderson 47.

⁹ Ibid 65 – 67.

¹⁰ Ibid 77.

¹¹ Anderson 77.

Robert Mapes Anderson's encyclopedic work, Vision of the Disinherited, on the American Pentecostal movement is one of the Movement's most important histories. He accurately tracks the early movements from its origins in the Keswick doctrines in England, and various undercurrents in early American Protestant denominations, including the Wesleyan Calvinists, Methodists and even Quakers.¹² Other important works include Grant Wacker's Heaven Below, which builds upon the history of Anderson's work and provides insight into the Early Pentecostals faith and theology. Wacker examines major tenants of the faith such as the authority of scripture, the role of women and minorities in the movement, the society around them, and the American nation in which they live in much the same way as Anderson. Wacker does come to different conclusions about the rationale for believers for their joining and continued involvement of the Pentecostal faith.

These two scholars differ in their opinion of why the adherents are drawn to the Pentecostal faith. Anderson argues that the majority of the adherents of the Pentecostal faith are disenfranchised members of society, the working poor and fringe who are searching for an entity to replace what they had been deprived of due to their social and economic class. Anderson makes the case that these deprived individuals were already of a religious stock, and the messages of the Pentecostal movement of the "imminent Kingdom" promised to them led to their joining and stay with the movement.¹³ Rather than do something about their lot through political or social action, they relied on the faith to escape it. Wacker writes that this attitude towards the denomination and the Pentecostal belief system an attempt by already religious persons to bridge the gap

¹² Anderson 29 – 43.

¹³ Ibid 235 – 236.

between the primitive and the modern, the ideal against the real, or the principle against the practical.¹⁴

More contemporary works have been penned by Randall J. Stephens, who concentrates solely on Southern Pentecostals and the Holiness tradition in his work The Fire Spreads. Stephens chooses to begin his history of the movement with the revival in Dunn North Carolina lead by charismatic preacher G. B. Cashwell.¹⁵ The most important research for my thesis comes from Mickey Crews' contemporary text The Church of God: A Social History. Crews' work concentrates specifically on the Church of God (Cleveland TN) and its contemporary history.

1.3: Introduction to Mickey Crews' Work

Mickey Crews demonstrates the social change specific to the Church of God (Cleveland Tennessee), which is the denomination whose Sunday School lessons will serve as the primary source for my thesis. Crews begins much like the other scholars who have studied the Pentecostal and Holiness movements, with an introduction to the theology and a short history of the movement. He then transitions to the specific theology of the Church of God and demonstrates the changes that the movement has made from its origins in Cleveland, Tennessee in the first decade of the twentieth century to the late seventies and early eighties. He gives special attention to the overall charismatic revival in America and its influence on the Church of God. Crews argues that "the charismatic movement helped to widen social acceptance of the Pentecostal message. Some of the Neopentecostals came from more affluent middle and upper

¹⁴ Wacker 10.

¹⁵ Randall J. Stephens, *The Fire Spreads: Holiness and Pentecostalism in the American South*, (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2008), 1.

classes.”¹⁶ Crews here is emphasizing the point that the overall charismatic movement helped aid the Church of God by making the Pentecostal faith more acceptable to middle and upper class families. “Had it not been for the charismatic revival, it probably would have taken much longer for old line denominations such as the Church of God to break into the higher stratum of American society. By the 1960s and 1970s, people from all socioeconomic classes had discovered Pentecostalism.”¹⁷ Again Crews emphasizes the point that the charismatic movement contained with it much of what the Pentecostals in the Church of God had believed since its inception. “By the mid-1970s the Pentecostal message of the Church of God had moved into the mainstream conservative evangelicalism, and the church had become one of the fastest-growing Protestant organizations in America.”¹⁸

He goes on to quote a member of the Church of God leadership weighing in on the social changes of the 1960s and 1970s stating that “modernism with its leadership of liberals and ultra-liberals is making rapid inroads into the minds and masses of the church-going people of our day.’ The rise of neo-orthodoxy and situational ethics, or the New Morality, produced a ‘crisis’ mentality among church leaders, who were troubled by such complex moral and social issues as abortion, gay rights, the Equal Rights Amendment, pornography, prayer in public schools, civil disobedience and civil rights.”¹⁹

¹⁶ Crews 159.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid 160.

While the idea of a “crisis mentality” carries the connotation of negativity, humankind has demonstrated that during times of great crisis the ability of an individual or group to be flexible and adapt to the changing world around them produces the greatest benefits. For a group such as a church, these benefits can be growth, success in conversion, and stability. “By the 1960s and 1970s,” Crews writes “the Church of God not only showed signs of religious tolerance but exhibited a remarkable degree of cooperation with charismatics within the historic churches. This was especially true among more progressive Church of God clergymen and laymen.”²⁰ Crews goes on to state that in the years following World War II, slowly but surely the Church of God continued to adapt and gird themselves with mainstream conservative and evangelical characteristics.²¹

While much has been written by Crews and other scholars on the origins, practices, and changes within the Pentecostal movement, a look into how the Church of God interprets their own philosophy upon a day-to-day basis has been absent from the academic study of the denomination. Here I seek to utilize one of the best resources for the layman adherent of the Church of God which outlines how to live the Pentecostal lifestyle and movement every day, from the scriptures of the Holy Bible. Since the mid-1940s the Church of God has issued a multid denominational commentary on the biblical scriptures for use in their Sunday School lessons. These commentaries, which examine the entire Bible each seven years, offer unparalleled insight of the Church of God’s social adaptation. These works not only demonstrate the changes in outlook of the church leadership as evidenced by the utilization of formally educated church

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

leaders as contributors to the commentaries themselves rather than merely ordained pastors, but also the changes of the general church population as well. I will in the following chapters examine changes in the interpretations of the creation narrative, allowing the denomination to adapt its literal reading of the scriptures in light of the scientific facts concerning the age of the earth. The second topic will demonstrate the changes in the scriptural interpretation of the end of days prophecies in the Revelation of St John, Daniel, and the Gospels. Topic three will examine the ministry of “faith healing” within the Church of God, and how the denomination has expanded its definition of “faith healing” to better align with the modern society and the medical advances that have been made. The fourth major topic will explore the “prosperity gospel” that the Church of God has adopted and how it has changed the message of economic prosperity and familial spiritual health for the adherents of the Church of God message. The final major topic will discuss the role of education and proper training for the leadership of the Church of God. In each of these topics the scriptures and their interpretation plays a major role for the changes that the Church of God has made over the decades to be examined. Supplementing these commentaries with the works of religious scholars that demonstrate the changes in the denomination’s theology will serve to illustrate my basic thesis that the Church of God has managed to weather the storm of social change following the civil rights era and beyond into the turbulent 70s and 80s changing their interpretation of scriptures while keeping a literal interpretation of those scriptures. Also the church keeps and even gains appeal to a increasingly accepting and open populace on whole.

CHAPTER 2: EXPLANATION OF MATERIAL

Like most Evangelical denominations, the Church of God participates in a weekly study of scripture and its practical applications for the lives of the adherents. These classes, usually on Sunday and prior to the worship service are separated into age groups and the core lesson is altered slightly for the purpose of relevance to the target audience. For this study, the lesson examples will come from the Evangelical Sunday School Commentary. Below is the explanation of the Evangelical Commentaries, which can be found in each volume.

“The lessons for the *Evangelical Commentary* are based on the Uniform Bible Lesson Series outlines, prepared by the Evangelical Curriculum Commission. (The Evangelical Curriculum Commission is a member of the National Association of Evangelicals). The lessons include studies from both the Old and New Testaments; and taken together with the other annual volumes of lessons in the cycle, they provide a valuable commentary on a wide range of biblical subjects.”²²

Pathway Press is the Church of God publishing company. With each year covering a portion of the scriptures, the entirety of the Biblical text is examined in a cycle that lasts for seven years. By having the same or similar sections of text recur for the lessons a

²²Evangelical Curriculum Commission, *Evangelical Commentary*, 1971 Ed., (Cleveland: Pathway Press, 1971), 3.

scholarly study can show the adaptability of the Church of God in their dogma and theology. It gives the reader a textual version of time lapse study with clear reference points across the decades for contrast and comparison.

Each lesson is broken down into numerous sections to ease the transition from a text to an oral study in groups of various ages. Each section of the lesson serves to encourage discussion and explanation of the biblical text being examined and aid the Sunday school teacher, who is more often than not a layperson and the student with nuances concerning the history of the lesson scriptures.

2.1: Outline of the Lessons

There is much to be said about the Commentaries themselves which will aid in the understanding of this study once an in-depth look at the scriptures and lessons begin. Each lesson is separated into twelve sections. The first is a short Bible background of the lesson for study for that particular week. The Commentator states that “these references point out passages of Scripture that are directly related to the lesson...”²³ These scriptures are often supplementary to the actual text for the lesson, but are relevant for the central message of the week’s lesson. Readers are instructed to read these before moving on to the lesson itself.

The next section is the “Time and Place”. This section describes for the reader the approximate time and place in which the lesson text is set, so far as it can be determined. As has been well established by biblical scholars throughout the years, there is a great deal of debate about the time and place for most of the biblical

²³Ibid 4.

narratives, and the lesson author recognizes that. “Where there is a wide range of opinions regarding the exact time or place, the printed New Testament works of Merrill C. Tenney and Old Testament works of Samuel J. Schultz are used to provide the information.”²⁴ Tenney was a professor of theological studies and dean of the Graduate school of Theology at Wheaton College and penned many works on New Testament interpretation. Schultz is an emeritus professor of Bible and theology at Wheaton College. Both of these authors are used by a variety of evangelical denominations. The leaders of the Church of God recognize that scriptural interpretation and exegesis is a contentious issue in biblical study and approach it by utilizing outside, albeit trusted, sources.

Following Time and Place is one of the more core elements of each week’s lesson. The *Printed Text and Central Message* section lays out the week’s scriptures of focus. This is separated from the background section of text. This section contains the focus scriptures for the lesson as the commentaries proceed through the entirety of the biblical text. As an example, the printed text for the first lesson of the 1971 commentary is Genesis 1:1 through 2:25. The commentator explains how the lessons have no mandated curriculum; rather they contain a central truth that ties the lesson itself to the scriptures of that week.

“Drawing on the Bible background the teacher delves into the printed text, expounding its contents to the students. Although the printed text contains

²⁴ Ibid.

different insights for each teacher, the central truth states the single unifying principle that the expositors attempted to clarify in each lesson.”²⁵

The printed text section allows the teacher the greatest freedom of interpretation in development of the week’s lesson, but the most important part of each commentary for this study will be the Exposition and Lesson outline as well as the Review and Discussion Questions sections that follow. Between these two sections is a dictionary, which attempts to bring pronunciation and clarification to the often difficult and obscure words and phrases from the biblical text.²⁶

The lesson outline and exposition can be understood as the heart of each individual commentary lesson.²⁷ The exposition material follows a specific outline, which is similar for weekly lesson. These outlines are to be understood not as exhaustive lesson plans, but rather a framework for each individual teacher to build upon.²⁸ However, looking at the exposition material for the purposes of this study, this framework stands as the demonstrative evidence of the church’s social positioning. In other words, although these lessons are primarily meant to serve as a teaching tool for the Church of God in a bible study format, they are an excellent source to see a sanctioned work of the Church of God demonstrate the evolution of the movement’s theology. Sidney Greidanus, emeritus professor of preaching at Calvin Theological Seminary in Grand Rapids, writes that “today’s preachers are dependent on the Scriptures as their source of revelation . . . The sermon as an exposition of Scriptures

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid 5.

²⁸ Ibid.

can trace its roots from the Old Testament priesthood (Deut 31:9-13; Neh 8:1-8) to the synagogue (see Luke 4:16-27; Acts 13:14-41; 17:1-3) to the New Testament church . . . contemporary preachers are called to be channels of the word of God. The metaphors of herald and ambassador apply as much to them as they did to the apostles.”²⁹ What Greidanus means is the like the apostles and priests of the biblical era, the commentators and teachers of these lessons are reliant on the scripture to convey the revelation from God to the believer. These commentaries serve an important role in the Church of God. The commentator, the pastor, and the Sunday School teacher all take on the mantle of these roles when they work with these scriptures and the lessons. This teaching of these lessons educates the faithful of the Church of God just as the apostles taught the earliest converts to Christianity.³⁰

The Review and Discussion Questions that follow each lesson exposition give further evidence in the changes that the Church of God have gone through over the past few decades. For the classroom, these questions are to be discussion starters in order to spur further interpretation and understanding of the central message. For the purposes of this study, these questions demonstrate the adaptation by the Church of God in response to the varying social climate they find themselves surrounded by. The majority of proof for this study will come from these two sections, with supporting arguments from various secondary sources.

²⁹ Sydney Greidanus, *The Modern Teacher and the Ancient Text: Interpreting and Preaching Biblical Literature*, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1988), 8.

³⁰ (Evangelical Curriculum Commission 1971, 5)

The final major section of importance for this study is the *Golden Text Homily*. It is a brief reflection on a single verse which has relevance to the lesson, often giving the lesson a real life example for the adherent to build upon.³¹

Beyond the *Homily* section are single sentence sermons, thoughts on the central truth of the lesson, an Evangelistic application, which relates the general theme of the weekly lesson to the charge of evangelism to the Christian population.³² There are also applications for youth studies and daily devotional guide to further the week's lesson into the devotions of both the teacher and class students.³³

2.2: Benefits of the Lesson Structure

By utilizing a consistent layout for each week's lesson, it allows the teacher to concentrate more on the lesson itself and its meaning to the adherent. For the purposes of this study, the consistency of the lessons allow a much easier comparison and demonstration of the changes in the Church of God over each seven year period that examines the Biblical scriptures in their entirety. Moving forward in this study, I will begin to more closely examine the contents of these Commentaries, starting with the changes in the exposition writers themselves as the years pass and the Church of God adapts itself to the social and economic changes that affect its adherents, both laity and church leadership alike.

Each volume of the Evangelical Commentary spans one year's worth of lessons, which are further divided up into quarters. The lessons' core, exposition and outline

³¹ (Evangelical Curriculum Commission 1971, 5)

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

sections that were described above are written and compiled by a single author.

Typically, the exposition writers are only assigned to a quarter of the year. This is one of the first areas where change is noticed in the Church of God's internal literature.

From leaders in the church and laymen in the earlier volumes to pastors with Doctoral degrees in Divinity and Theology, as well as faculty in seminaries and even select secular universities demonstrate a movement within the Church of God to a more scholarly approach to the study of the Biblical text. As the surrounding society put more emphasis on higher education and professionalism, the Church of God saw that to gain further legitimacy in comparison to the mainline Christian denominations. Couple this with the changing demographics of the adherent and it becomes clear that the Church of God was adapting. "Pentecostals were increasingly seen in leadership positions in industry, business, finance, and education... There were even Pentecostals in the professions; for the first time, there were Pentecostal lawyers, medical doctors, and university professors."³⁴ There has been a change within the Church of God's adherents, but as a whole the movement still ranks near the bottom of socioeconomic ladder when compared to other denominations. This process is not a new one, nor is it exclusive to Pentecostalism. The sociologist Max Weber states that for the leaders of the Church to ensure the continuity of the movement the demands of an ever increasingly intellectual laity for a more scholarly approach to the Scriptures, sermons, and devotionals have been, and are continuing to be met.³⁵ What Weber is alluding to here is that as the numbers of adherents grows the demands for a more scholarly and intellectual approach to the scriptures is needed to keep the growth sustained.

³⁴ Vinson Synan, *The Holiness Pentecostal Tradition: Charismatic Movements in the Twentieth Century*, Grand Rapids: William B Eerdsman's Publishing Company, 1971), 221 – 222.

³⁵ Max Weber, *Sociology of Religion*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1991), 65 – 66.

CHAPTER 3: THE CREATION NARRATIVE

Grant Wacker notes that if asked, a convert to the Pentecostal doctrine would state that the authority for daily life rests in the Bible.³⁶ The Bible, its subsequent doctrine, and the Holy Spirit function as individual parts in a single whole for authority, and these are not subject to historical change, though the saints will modify their own convictions about authority to better suit the needs of day-to-day life.³⁷ The purpose of this project is to show how one Holiness Pentecostal denomination, The Church of God (Cleveland, TN,) has modified their conceptions through an examination of Sunday School lesson plans. What better way to begin examining these changes in the perceptions of the Church of God than with Genesis and the creation narrative? The creation narrative has been the subject of study and debate for centuries, and with the advances in science that came in the late twentieth century the Church of God recognized that as a body, they too would have to reexamine the Biblical texts in order to continue to gain legitimacy with the secular world.³⁸ The first lesson text to be examined comes from the Commentary on Genesis. By exploring this lesson a point of reference can be established to compare the earlier theology of the Church of God through other author's works. It will also allow a contrast to the later lessons on the

³⁶Wacker, 70.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Tim Berra, *Evolution and the myth of creationism : a basic guide to the facts in the evolution debate*, (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1990).

same scriptures and demonstrate how the Church of God now interprets the creation narrative and the beginnings of human kind.

3.1: 1971 Evangelical Commentary on Genesis

First, an examination of the creation narrative from a popular study Bible utilized by various evangelical denominations can demonstrate the ideology of authority when it comes to the biblical scriptures. The Commentary utilizes The Scofield Study Bible to reference the Genesis text for the lesson. This Bible is a unique dispensationalist text that was originally issued in 1909.³⁹ From its inception The Scofield Study Bible was written to aid the reader understand the Bible as a unified whole.⁴⁰ Dispensationalist theology is the theology that the God deals with humanity through a progressive way.⁴¹ There are specific periods of time when people have been responsible for specific and varying tests of their obedience of God, from the beginning of time until the current day and beyond until the end of days.⁴² Dr. Cyrus Scofield is attributed with the establishment of this doctrine in Christian theology. The text, like many dispensationalist materials, is popular with the Evangelical Christian tradition. The Scofield Study Bible would not have been utilized or even considered by the more mainline Protestant denominations and the Catholic Church. There is a radical difference in the acceptance of the dispensationalist theology between the Catholic Church, so called mainline denominations and the Evangelicals that have adopted this theology. The Scofield Study Bible explains the concept of time by pointing out that

³⁹ C. I. Scofield, ed. *Holy Bible King James Version*, (New York: Oxford University Press 2002), viv.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

“day” (Hebrew: Yom) has four different connotations.⁴³ A twenty four hour period, a solar day, a distinct day which God has set aside for a special purpose, such as Yom Kippur, and a longer period of time which has no temporal beginning and end.⁴⁴ The commentator makes it clear that the fourth connotation which would be used to describe the text of Genesis 1:3-5. An examination of the 1971 Evangelical Commentary mirrors this explanation. It too mentions the four uses of Yom in the Hebrew Bible texts, but goes on to disarm any potential rebuffs by critics by pointing out that no matter what the actual duration of the creation narrative the power of God and that all of creation exists because of “Him and Him alone”⁴⁵ The commentary then goes on to pose the question to the converts “Why is the theory of evolution unsatisfactory for explaining the origin of life?” in an attempt to not only stimulate discussion in the Sunday School classroom, but to also serve to help further legitimize the ideology that the creation narrative found in the text is authority.

The lesson text covers a wide range of concepts, but for this exposition the important points come from the attention given to the literal interpretation of the time elapsed in the creation narrative. The other major point is the influence of science upon the creation of the universe and how to incorporate both into a healthy spiritual understanding of the text and Christian exegesis.

⁴³ Ibid 2.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ (Evangelical Curriculum Commission 1971, 264)

3.2: 1977 Evangelical Commentary on Genesis

Grant Wacker points out that Scripture is the first and final authority that can be seen in the Pentecostal theology.⁴⁶ The blueprint exists for the life of the faithful, and it has been unchanged since the apostolic age.⁴⁷ God had not changed, the commentary asserted so there was no need to change the blueprint. This sentiment is still quite true, as the scripture still stands as the blueprint for the Pentecostal lifestyle but it is the aim of this thesis to demonstrate that a change can be seen in the interpretation of the scriptures. Wacker also came to this same conclusion throughout his work, pointing out that the pragmatic nature of the Pentecostal believers led them to adopt the advances of the information age.⁴⁸ Within the commentary the use of multiple definitions of Yom is examined, but there are key differences are to be found.

The Church of God recognizes that there are conservative Protestant voices that prescribe to each of the four ideologies that follow the definitions of Yom. In other words, within the conservative denominations of Evangelical Protestants, various authors utilize each of the four ideologies mentioned earlier in the chapter to explain the nuances of the Creation narrative in the light of modern scientific discovery. The Commentary warns against dogmatism for or against a single interpretation of the creation narrative, opening up the Church of God to acceptance of the scientific findings concerning the age and scope of the universe, rather than a narrow belief in a static and measurable idea of a “day” in creation.⁴⁹ This means that there is far too much

⁴⁶ Wacker 71.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid 267.

⁴⁹ (Evangelical Curriculum Commission 1977 – 1978, 17 – 18)

scientific evidence to continue to ascribe to the belief that the universe was created in a literal timeline of six days. The theology must adapt in the light of overwhelming evidence, and this is exactly what the Church of God has done in the 1977 commentary. The idea of an exact timeframe and order of creation, despite what the biblical scriptures say, is seen as left open to discussion and only the idea that God is the transcendent Creator and everything is of his will is irrefutable.⁵⁰ Another example of the change in connotation of authority of scripture and understanding is the follow-up question posed by the commentator. Rather than try and refute the idea of evolution with a strict understanding of the text, the commentator offers up the idea of “creative evolution” which postulates that evolution does in fact occur, following a Biblical design of divine creation.⁵¹ That idea alone is a far cry from the hard line stance against the theory of evolution presented by the commentator in the 1971 edition. In eight short years, a major change is evident in the ideology and theology of the Church of God. This change would also find its way to the everyday lives of the saints outside of their interpretation of the creation narrative and the theory of evolution. The shift from a certainty of the texts in a completely literal sense to a utilization of science in conjunction with scripture has demonstrated that the Church of God is open to change and viewpoints that are more widely accepted by American society.⁵²

It is even worth noting that the Church of God illustrates a very progressive ideology with concern to the human’s role in the ecology and environmental protection. Progressive means forward thinking. The ideology of conservation, ecology, and

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid

⁵² Wacker, 267.

environmental protection by the Church of God here is ahead of its time. Concerning the notion of man's "dominion" over the earth as promised by God, the Commentary points out "All through history 'dominion' has been turned to exploitation, misappropriation, and destruction. Today we are reaping the harvest!"⁵³ The commentary even goes so far as to postulate possible inhabitation of other planets by posing the question for discussion does the dominion promised by Genesis extend to the Moon and other Planets?⁵⁴

3.3: Concluding Thoughts on the Creation Narrative

With all of the changes, including expectation of a future in space, care for the environment, and scientific theory of the age and size of the universe it is evident that the Church of God has progressed well beyond its perceived draconian worldviews. With the evident changes made by the Church of God during the period examined here, it is not beyond the realm of possibility that the Church of God will continue to expand their understanding of the origins of the universe as science makes further discoveries, and the Church will also continue, as Wacker postulates, to adapt their idea of scriptural authority through continued exegesis and scholarly debate of the biblical text of the creation narrative. The problem for biblical literalists that science has found overwhelming evidence that refutes a literal interpretation of the creation narrative has been effectively dealt with by the Church of God in these commentaries. Though they still understand the text to be final authority and accurate, the interpretation is subject to change. This ability to change interpretation of the sacred scriptures is not limited to

⁵³ Evangelical Curriculum Commission 1979 - 1980, 19)

⁵⁴ Ibid.

the creation narrative, but as the next chapter will show the prophecy concerning the end of days has also been re-examined.

CHAPTER 4: REVELATION AND APOCALYPTIC PROPHECY

Continuing the theme of examining the authority of scripture, this chapter will explore an important element of the Church of God's worldview. The prophetic scriptures of Daniel, Isaiah, and the Revelation of St. John have been a cornerstone of the adherent's daily lives. The very ideology of the "gifts of the spirit," blessings and imminent Second Coming permeate the Church of God in such a way that these scriptures and the lessons concerning them are of special interest in an examination of evolution of the Church of God.⁵⁵

The Second Coming of Christ, also known to evangelicals as the rapture, is the prophetic belief that Christ will return to take the believers to heaven with him after the disasters of the tribulation and the reign of the Antichrist.⁵⁶ The scriptures some believers associate with the Second Coming of Christ can be found in Matthew Chapters 24 and 25, Mark 13:24 – 27, and Luke 21:25 – 28. The Second Coming scriptures list signs and wonders that the faithful could watch for, to ensure that they are prepared to meet Christ. A warning is also given concerning this necessity to be ready in Matthew 24:40 – 45, Mark 13:32 – 37, and Like 21:34 – 36.

With the rise of Evangelical Christianity coming at the end of the Nineteenth Century in American culture this call to be watchful of the signs that had led to fervor

⁵⁵ Anderson, 113.

⁵⁶ Amy Frykholm, *Rapture Culture: Left Behind in Evangelical America*, (New York, Oxford University Press, 2004) 1.

that Anderson and others saw as primitive and almost fanatical. The Commentaries will demonstrate how the attitude of the Church of God has changed during the later years of the Twentieth Century, and the attitude has been tempered to much better align with mainstream America.

4.1: 1978 Evangelical Commentary on Revelation

The late 1970s found the secular world entrenched in the waning days of the Cold War. The shadow of a major showdown between the USSR and the United States still loomed over both countries and the Church of God was well aware of the happenings in the world around it. This awareness and interest in the secular world would seem to mirror Anderson's examination of the Pentecostals during the First and Second World Wars.⁵⁷ Anderson states that the Pentecostal message taught believers that Russia would become the "King of the North" and an alliance with Europe and the Pope would constitute the "King of the South" prophesied in Revelation.⁵⁸ The lesson text will demonstrate the change that the Church of God has when understanding the end of days prophecy, starting with the prophecy of the four horsemen of the Apocalypse. A look into the lesson concerning the four horsemen of the Apocalypse demonstrates not only the Church's dispensationalist view of the world, but also a pragmatic approach to the understanding of the scriptures and how they relate to the world around them. I will demonstrate that while the Church of God instructs its members to be vigilant, there is nothing in the commentaries that specifically points directly to the Soviet Union or the Vatican as the heralds of the end of days.

⁵⁷ Anderson 239.

⁵⁸ Ibid 84 – 85.

The four horsemen of the Apocalypse is a prophetic section of text in Revelation that details the coming of a man and three major catastrophes that would pave the way for the Antichrist to reign until the Second Coming of Jesus and his defeat. The text of Revelation 6:1 – 8 describes these figures in detail. The first horseman, riding a white horse, is sent out to conquer after have been given a crown. This is to be understood as the appearance of the Antichrist who will conquer with the diplomacy of a ruler. The second horseman arrives on a red horse, and he is given a sword. He signifies war, most likely global war. The third horseman arrives riding a black horse, and he is given scales signifying economic failure and widespread famine because of a global collapse of the economy. The final horseman is death itself, who rides a sickly pale horse and could be understood as the manifestation of all three riders before him. This is a very vivid prophecy with intense imagery for the reader of the text.

Remarking on the first Horseman, the Commentary postulates that there are two popular theories concerning these apocalyptic visions.⁵⁹ The first theory understands that these “woes” from Heaven were experienced by the early church during the first centuries of its existence.⁶⁰ The second theory positions these scenarios as in the days to come, as a reaction by YHWH to the sins of mankind over the course of history.⁶¹ Rather than take a hard stance that the only explanation of these theories is that they are in the time to come, which one would expect of a millenarian sect of Pentecostals, the commentator puts forth the idea there are dual fulfillments, one of which taking place

⁵⁹ (Evangelical Curriculum Commission 1978, 228)

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

near or during the time of the writing of text and another many years in the future.⁶² The commentator even goes on to state that it is likely that the world has experienced these situations many times throughout history, and they are all a lead up to a final climax of judgment.⁶³ This is to be understood that though signs may be evident around the believers that could be interpreted as being the signs of the end of days, the faithful should keep in mind that similar situations may have already come and gone. All of history moves towards the end of days, and it is not the place of the believer to attempt to *force* the interpretation of the signs of the Apocalypse. The end will come when God wills it, and the hour is not known to anyone but God. The believer should continue to do the work they were charged with rather than become panicked about possible prophecy.⁶⁴

Skipping the mention of the second Horseman and moving on to the third, the woe of famine, an interesting point is made by the commentator. “When he opened the third seal I heard the living creature say ‘Come and see.’ So I looked and behold, a black horse, and he who sat on it had a pair of scales in his hand.”⁶⁵ Rather than paint a picture of some cosmic event spurred on by a vengeful God being the cause of the famine and pestilence which the rider of the black horse brings, the commentator merely points out that these events are a natural consequence of war and destruction. The commentator points out that these signs have been seen before in American history during the war effort for WWII.⁶⁶ By utilizing a look into the recent past and the days

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid 220.

⁶⁵ Revelation 6:5

⁶⁶ (Evangelical Curriculum Commission 1978, 228)

of rationing of meals, and government control and distribution of supplies the commentator ties in the apocalyptic worldview of Revelation to an actual experience that many of the adherents would remember, reminding them that though they did struggle they also persevered.⁶⁷

The final horseman brings death and hell to the judgment of mankind and of the earth. Here again the commentator acknowledges that death is also a natural consequence of war, and hell is the end that awaits those who have not converted to the faith.⁶⁸ At no point is there a feeling of dread or urgency to the commentary lesson concerning the end of days, which again contrasts the words of a noted biblical scholar. Reinhold Niebuhr, one of the most important neo-orthodoxy theologians of the American twentieth century, theorizes that the ultimate expressions of fear, anxiety, insecurity and dread concerning death and the end human existence are more than just the eschatological ideals of extinction of mankind and ultimate judgment.⁶⁹ His dual volume work on The Nature and Destiny of Man theorizes how the human mind and spirit encounters and interprets theology, scripture, spiritual and physical life. He states that it is the idea that life can be cut off before it has run its course, and a person could be held subject to their sins before the faith of divine mercy can give comfort is the real peril of life, it is the “sting of death” as Niebuhr explains.⁷⁰ In other words the fear of death is not that life will end, but that a man could die before he has had time to find divine mercy. The believer in the Pentecostal faith need not be concerned by these fears

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid 228-229.

⁶⁹ Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1964), vol. 2, *Human Destiny*, 292 – 293.

⁷⁰ Ibid 293.

as he has acquired the “Second Blessing.” The commentary goes on to pose the question to the adherent “What can Christians do to postpone or bring about deliverance from impending calamities (such as nuclear wars, race violence, etc.) in our modern days?”⁷¹ Faith, mindfulness of the society around them, and the continued emphasis on winning souls for God are the means to deliver the believer from the fear of the final judgment.⁷²

The commentator also returns to the point of the two theories of biblical scholarship with regard to the end of days, again pointing out that these visions more likely than not were meant to address the church of the early church when the civil wars of the Roman empire created the turmoil that the author of Revelation envisioned.⁷³ The commentator does not completely abandon the premise of a coming final judgment, however, noting that at the least these passages give some indication as to what the end will look like, so that the adherent may be vigilant in their watch over the world around them.⁷⁴ The Church of God, rather than treating the prophecy of the end of days as a foregone conclusion and something to be both feared and hoped for, again adapts the authority of the scripture to mesh better with the secular world in a very unsure period for humanity.

4.2: 1985 Evangelical Commentary on Revelation

Advancing to the 1985 commentary, the matching lesson concerns the rise of the Antichrist. The Antichrist stands as an evil figure who will take on the form of a

⁷¹ (Evangelical Curriculum Commission 1978, 229)

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

powerful leader both politically and spiritually.⁷⁵ He will rise after the Rapture and rule for seven years before his defeat at Armageddon.⁷⁶ The prophetic scenarios are derived from passages in Daniel, Revelation, Isaiah, and Ezekiel.⁷⁷ Here, there is evidence that the Church of God is trying to connect contemporary technologies to biblical eschatology; with the commentator inquiring of the adherents in what ways could the rise of the computer age put men at risk of being tagged with the mark of the beast in subtle and even hidden ways.⁷⁸ However, outside of this concern of the utilization of technology in the subduing of humanity--and the recognition that such an act is now more possible than any time before in history--the commentary spends most of the lesson focusing on the issues associated with the Antichrist. Noting that there have been powerful men in the past who have gained populist support within their own geographic region, namely Fidel Castro and Joseph Stalin, the person of the Antichrist's influence and popularity will have to be worldwide.⁷⁹ Throughout the lesson there is a complete absence of any sense of dread or urgency concerning the end of days. Noticeably missing is any sense of an "imminent, apocalyptic return of Christ..." and the tone of the lesson is devoid of the perspective that history is running downhill towards chaos and collapse.⁸⁰ The interpretation of the text however does still remain true to the dispensationalist mentality of the Pentecostal faith and the Scofield Study Bible. This again serves to fortify my thesis that the Pentecostal Church is able to blend changes in the interpretation while keeping the fundamental tenets of the faith.

⁷⁵ Paul Boyer, *When Time Shall be No More: Prophecy Belief in Modern American Culture* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press 1992) 272.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ (Evangelical Curriculum Commission 1984-1985, 380)

⁷⁹ Ibid 379.

⁸⁰ Anderson 81 - 82

4.3: 1992 Evangelical Commentary on Revelation

Turning now to the 1992 commentary on the same lesson concerning the reign of the Antichrist the theme is very similar. The commentator poses three questions for the adherents to discuss in the lessons. First, the commentator asks “What is being done in your church to assist the Christians in fully understanding the future role of the Antichrist?”⁸¹ It is subtle, but worth noting that the author says future role, signaling that the commentator does not believe that the Antichrist has not made his presence known. The second question posed asks the adherents “How do you account for the supernatural power the False Prophet will use to entice people to worship the Antichrist?”⁸² Again the commentator references the future, and inquires as to a modern explanation for the fantastical claims which Revelation makes concerning the powers of the False Prophet during the Tribulation. Finally, the author asks of the readers: “Why has God allowed evil influences to rage as they have during the centuries of the past?”⁸³ The lesson text surrounding these questions serves to offer interpretation, criticism, and basic commentary on the verses that make up the lesson, and while there is a more fundamentalist tone to the lesson text and questions that are posed, again there is no feeling of dread or anxiety about the end of days. As stated above, there is still a literal interpretation that these signs will one day come, and they will signal a new era in keeping with the dispensational view of the Church of God, however there is non dispensationalist view that the while the faithful should be mindful

⁸¹ (Evangelical Curriculum Commission 1991-1992, 405)

⁸² Ibid 406.

⁸³ Ibid 407.

of the prophecy and the world around them, the millenarian view of an imminent coming of Christ is absent from the interpretation of Revelation.

4.4: Concluding Thoughts on Revelation and Prophecy

These select passages represent a general theme among the lessons concerning the end of days prophecies. Throughout all of the lessons there is not one instance of a specific event being described as a sign of the coming apocalypse. This is not to say that the importance of the scriptures and the eschatological myths are being discounted by the Church of God. The idea of a soon coming end to the world is still a central tenant of the Church's message, but what these selections from the commentaries demonstrate is that the views of the Pentecostal's focus on the end times is not as prominent as Anderson would have us believe. Anderson's statement referenced above describes Pentecostals in the early twentieth century, but the sentiment is shared by writers like Heather Hendershot who reference the evangelical Christians of the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Hendershot, while examining the rise of apocalyptic literature, states that "Mainline Protestants interpret Revelation symbolically, but evangelicals take a more literal approach."⁸⁴ While the Church of God does interpret the scriptures literally, they believe that there will be a man who will assume the role of Antichrist for example, the interpretation of the text does not concentrate on single events as concrete evidence of the Antichrist's existence *at the time of the publication*. The lesson texts examined demonstrate elasticity in the interpretation of these vivid images, rather than a consistent dogma of the soon coming end of days. The discussion questions posed by the authors serve to stimulate

⁸⁴ Heather Hendershot, *Shaking the World for Jesus*, (), 178.

conversation over the text and the personal understanding of the scriptures, rather than to encourage the adherents to validate the prophetic scriptures through the experiences that they have lived through.⁸⁵ Weber calls this elasticity the development of an “inner religious faith.”⁸⁶ That inner faith does not subscribe to rigid dogmas or sacred laws, but rather allows for the adherent to alter their own maxims of conduct depending on the circumstances they find themselves in.⁸⁷ This inner faith theory seems to mirror Grant Wacker’s perspective on the faithful and their modifying of the authority of the texts to fit a more modern and secular world surrounding them.⁸⁸ The Church of God still understands the texts as inspired, infallible word of God. The scriptures are still understood literally. There will be a great tribulation, there will be disasters that will herald the end of days, and there will be a great judgment of all of the inhabitants of the earth. This is evident by reading the statements of faith found at the beginning of each commentary. Like most evangelicals, there is always flexibility in the *interpretation* of these scriptures. What disasters are never fully disclosed, and the exact timeline of the great tribulation is not known to the believer, but in the faith of the believer it is known only to God.

⁸⁵Anderson 80.

⁸⁶Weber 209.

⁸⁷Ibid.

⁸⁸Wacker 70.

CHAPTER 5: FAITH HEALING

Turning now from the authority of the texts to the authority of the Holy Spirit in the lives of the adherents, the following chapters will deal with the practices of the Church of God members. First will be an examination of faith healing, which has served as a major tenet of Pentecostalism since its beginnings. This chapter will serve to demonstrate the growth and evolution of the theology concerning faith healing in the Church of God throughout the period examined. The aim here is to demonstrate how the modern church has adjusted to incorporate the advances of medical science with the theology of spiritual gifts in a balance that protects the physical and spiritual health of the believers.

Faith healing has existed as one of Pentecostalism's most contentious elements, and the source of much controversy and even legal troubles.⁸⁹ Early on, this idea of miraculous healing was so intense and the scriptures which the adherents utilize to support their claims of divine intercession were so strictly and literally interpreted that it led to a mistrust and even flat out dismissal of doctors, hospitals, and traditional medicines.⁹⁰ The Church of God utilizes the literal interpretation of the scriptures such as Isaiah 53:5, Exodus 15:26, Psalms 34:19, Psalms 103:3, Matthew 8:17, John 15:7, Peter 2:24, and the favorite James 5:14 – 15 as evidence for the divine and miraculous healing of physical ailments through faith and prayer.

⁸⁹ Crews 74.

⁹⁰ Anderson 36.

In the case of the Church of God, Crews notes that the suspicious attitude toward medicine was not just limited to the faithful, but was more of a regional phenomenon in the rural Appalachian areas where the Church was based.⁹¹ The inhabitants of these rural mountain communities had very minimal access to hospitals and doctors so a reliance on folk remedies and local cures was already ingrained into the culture before the Church of God began its work in the ministry of “spiritual healing.”⁹² As time progressed, the strict belief in faith healing dissipated in the younger generations of the Church of God members.⁹³ Crews argues that the economic and social changes in the post war era saw a further erosion of the fervor for faith healing as the new more wealthy and better educated members of the Church pushed for the leadership to embrace the advances in medical science rather than to dismiss it as something against the faith.⁹⁴ However during the seventies and the charismatic revival, a renewed interest in the faith healing ministry appeared in the Church of God.⁹⁵ However, as a look into the text of the commentaries will show, the Church did not revert back to its initial views on divine healing and the place of modern science, but shows again elasticity in the dogma of scriptural authority on the matters of spiritual healing.

5.1: 1972 Evangelical Commentary on Faith Healing

In an examination of Matthew 8, the commentary looks at the story of the cleansing of a leper and the faith of the Roman Centurion to demonstrate contemporary

⁹¹Crews 74, Callhan, Richard J. *Work and Faith in the Kentucky Coal Fields*, (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2008).

⁹² Crews 74.

⁹³ Ibid 79.

⁹⁴ Ibid 80.

⁹⁵ Ibid 82.

implications of faith healing. It is very evident in these passages that the concept of divine healing is still very much a part of the Church of God's ministry. The commentator poses the question "If one has a contagious disease, how should a Christian show his interest in healing? Should he lay hands on him as Jesus did?"⁹⁶ This question is left open to discussion, however the laying on of hands is still being utilized by the Church of God to bring about divine healing to the faithful. The commentator then goes on to ask "What should be the Christian's proper attitude towards physicians and medicine and in God's healing power?"⁹⁷ A bit further into the lesson the Church's position on the matter of medicine and science's place in the lives of the faithful is clearly explained and these questions posed throughout the lesson are answered. "We must remember that God has given us food, clothes, homes, schools, hospitals, nurses, doctors, friends, loved ones, and eternal life."⁹⁸ Here, the Church of God author accepts the necessity of outside help concerning the health and well being of its members, adapting interpretation of divine healing to include the advances of medical science and the care of modern physicians as part of the ultimate design by God for the lives of the faithful.

At the same time, throughout the lesson there is still a great deal of emphasis placed on the need for intense and in the denomination's rhetoric, "true faith" for divine healing to happen, as is to be expected from a literal interpretation of the scriptures surrounding the divine healing miracles of Jesus and later of the apostles.⁹⁹ True faith

⁹⁶ (Evangelical Curriculum Commission 1972, 319 – 320)

⁹⁷ Ibid 320.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Ibid 320.

would be the belief that through God all things are possible.¹⁰⁰ In yet another gospel scripture concerning divine healing, the commentary once again poses the question “When should one who is ill exercise faith in God-before seeking professional help or after?”¹⁰¹ Quoting James H. Mumme, a Pentecostal commentator the author describes how all healing can be seen as divine. “In one sense, all healing is divine in that God has placed the principle of healing in His creation. Medical Science merely removes that which hinders natural healing; the actual healing is of God.”¹⁰² There still does exist, in the eyes of the Church of God author, the direct and miraculous healing that is an act of God.¹⁰³ There is also some lingering of the older ideology that sin does still manifest itself in the physical ailments of humankind.

The commentary still holds an ideology that sin is the root cause of sickness. The commentary poses an interesting question, asking “in what way is leprosy a type of sin?”¹⁰⁴ As Crews notes, it was only in recent years that the Church of God worked up to an understanding that the decay of the human body and sickness were inevitable, even to the faithful.¹⁰⁵ It is natural law, and not some primal defect of the soul or spirit that causes humankind to be susceptible to disease and illness.¹⁰⁶ Crews does note that there is a reason why healing does not occur, and these still mirror the more literal interpretation of the texts. Lack of faith and the teaching of patience and maturity are still understood as the rationale which God utilizes when withholding healing from the

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Ibid 356.

¹⁰² Ibid 357.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid 320.

¹⁰⁵ Crews 82.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

faithful.¹⁰⁷ The Commentary mirrors this ideology in an earlier lesson which also addresses the notion of divine healing. The commentator asks of the faithful “Can a man be saved or healed without a faith of his own? How about when one is so helpless as to be unable to have faith?”¹⁰⁸ These questions once again demonstrate the straddling of the line by the Church of God between previous notions and the pragmatic adaptation of faith to fit the challenges of being a successful denomination in the contemporary period.¹⁰⁹

5.2: 1979 – 1980 Evangelical Commentary on Faith Healing

In the 1979 – 1980 commentary in the matching lesson on divine healing, and the faith that is necessary for faith healing to be successful, the commentator looks further into the text of Matthew. Specifically, the story of the healing of the person afflicted with palsy and the determination of his friends to bring the man to Jesus. Jesus is being referred to by the commentator as the “Divine Physician.”¹¹⁰ This lesson instructs the adherents not to forget the place of friends in their lives, while reinforcing the ideas of strong faith can bring about divine healing for the afflicted. Here there is no mention made of modern science and medicine with regards to the care of the sick, but nowhere in the commentaries is there any indication that the Church of God has shifted its emphasis away from the importance of using avenues other than strictly faith to keep the faithful healthy and care for them during times of sickness and disease. The friends of the man with palsy play an important role for the commentator. The friends

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ (Evangelical Curriculum Commission 1972, 285)

¹⁰⁹ Wacker 10.

¹¹⁰ (Evangelical Curriculum Commission 1979 – 1980, 373)

demonstrate a key point in their *actions*. Taking the man afflicted with palsy to Jesus to be healed is akin to seeking medical attention. In contrast to the story of the Roman centurion it is necessary for direct action to be taken to ensure that the person is healed, and not just a reliance on “pure faith.”¹¹¹ “Pure faith” is understood by the commentary to be the belief that only prayer and intercession is needed to heal the believer. While it would be far too loose of an interpretation to say that these actions taken by the man’s friends can be understood as seeking the care of medical professionals in the event that an adherent is stricken with an illness, the commentary text does not give any indication that there can be divine healing without human influence, it does not say that there cannot be either.¹¹² There is also something to be said of the four friends themselves. Friends of the faithful may indeed be members of the medical community and their aid could be just one facet of the healing ministry. In light of the past extremism of the doctrine within the Church of God that sometimes went so far as to result in the loss of life for a member afflicted with disease this attitude demonstrates the change in the Church’s dogma.¹¹³

5.3: 1991 – 1992 Evangelical Commentary on Faith Healing

The 1991-1992 volume of the Evangelical Commentary contains an entire lesson devoted to miracles. It serves as a culmination lesson that incorporates miracles of healing, deliverance from bondage and evil, and the miracle of salvation that is a central tenant to Pentecostalism. The lesson serves to reinforce the Pentecostal ideology of the continuation of the fruits of the spirit promised to the church, and the

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Crews, 74.

signs following the first Pentecost. For the purposes of this examination, this lesson on miracles illustrates the balance between pragmatic and progressive thought within the Church of God and the esoteric elements of the belief structure. The first question posed by the commentator for this lesson asks, “What is greater in a miracle, the physical changes that occur or the message about God that the miracle conveys? What should be believer’s response be to the miraculous work of God?”¹¹⁴ Indeed, what should be the response by the faithful to a miracle during the early 1990s? And what would constitute a miracle to the faithful of this generation? During the early part of the twentieth century, at the beginnings of the Church of God, there is no doubt that the response would be much different than today. Wacker notes that “First generation writers never worried much about the exact form of miracles. All they knew was that signs and wonders came directly from God... and they happened all the time and in all manner of places.”¹¹⁵ This doctrine of miracles coming directly from God has not changed, but the commentary is very specific with its statement that believers should not rely only on miracles, but instead that the divine work is also in the unseen workings of daily life.¹¹⁶ In other words, the faithful need to understand that the modern advances in science and medicine are indeed the works of God. The “unseen” aspect is that God willed these advancements to be discovered by man, rather than acting in the highly visible way He enacted miracles in the Holy Scriptures. The next question posed by the commentator is three-fold and inquires, “What role does God’s working of miracles play in the life of faith? How should the believer look at miracles?

¹¹⁴ (Evangelical Curriculum Commission 1991 – 1992, 196)

¹¹⁵ Wacker, 93.

¹¹⁶ (Evangelical Curriculum Commission 1991 – 1992, 196)

Are miracles part of the continuing plan of God?”¹¹⁷ The research and conclusions that Grant Wacker reaches the same conclusions that I assert here. The elasticity of the Church of God’s theology allows them to keep their traditions intact in the face of modern society and its advancements.

5.4: Concluding thoughts on Faith Healing

The miraculous can be a daily occurrence for the Church of God faithful but that does not temper its significance.¹¹⁸ The believer is once again confronted with the duality of faith that permeates the Church of God, a belief in the esoteric and fantastical in the form of miracles by the divine, but is warned against a reckless faith that eliminates self reliance and personal responsibility for the safety and health of the faithful and their families. The primitive with the progressive once again demonstrates its existence in the Church of God worldview. In the early days of the movement divine healing was one of the more extreme positions, so much so that it generated suspicion and even conflict with the authorities.¹¹⁹ As the authors of the Commentaries have demonstrated, as well as the works of Mickey Crews and Grant Wacker, the Church of God has moved away from such extreme beliefs. They have accepted the place of science and medicine, even adopting these advancements as part of God’s miraculous design for humanity. Without sacrificing any of the importance of the gifts of the spirit that are at the core of the Pentecostal faith, the Church of God now embraces the modern world.

¹¹⁷ Ibid 198.

¹¹⁸ Wacker, 94.

¹¹⁹ Crews, 74 – 75.

Chapter 6: Finances and Economic Prosperity in the Church of God

The area of finance and economic prosperity has been one in which the Church of God has made its most dramatic changes in recent history. An ideology of earthly as well as spiritual prosperity has grown to prominence in the Church of God, as evident in the lessons on finance. Stewardship and effective money management are being taught as equally key Christian values as righteous and sin free living. This chapter will explain the multiple lessons on the subject of stewardship within the Church of God believers and their families.

The stigma of Pentecostals being poor and destitute members of societies fringe was once well-entrenched in scholarship. In the tellingly titled Vision of the Disinherited, the historian Robert Mapes Anderson asserts that, “Economically, socially, culturally, and even physically displaced and deprived, the convert to Pentecostalism often found in this new-old version of Christianity an ideological and emotional affinity to his religious heritage, broadly conceived.”¹²⁰ However, as Crews demonstrates, this attitude has fallen by the wayside in light of the major changes in the Church of God. Crews argues that “A much wider sector of the American society had accepted the Church of God and the egalitarian appeal of the Pentecostal message. Pentecostalism had become respectable.”¹²¹ Helped along by the charismatic movement across Christianity to widen the social acceptance of the Pentecostal

¹²⁰ Anderson, 136.

¹²¹ Crews, 159.

message, by the late Sixties to early seventies the Church of God added affluent members to the ranks of the believer.¹²² The message of egalitarianism appealed to a broad spectrum of Americans, and the church had become “respectable.” By the mid Seventies, the church was well on its way to the mainstream of the conservative evangelical movement, becoming one of the fastest growing denominations in America.¹²³ The messages of stewardship and finance would have been just one part of the greater changes in the movement, considering the socioeconomic status of the newest members of the fold.

The church of God has recently undertaken a new ideology of the “Prosperity Gospel” to its theology concerning wealth and prosperity of the faithful. Simply put the theology of “Prosperity Gospel” states that those faithful to God and Christ will be those who receive the blessings of finance, physical and spiritual health, and familial stability. It is similar in its theology to the long standing notion in the Pentecostal tradition that those who have the most faith will receive the greatest manifestations of the Gifts of the Spirit. I will utilize the work of R. Andrew Chestnut and his case study of the Pentecostals in Brazil to provide an example of this theology. Chestnut uses the ideology of the prosperity gospel through familial stability and physical health to demonstrate his findings, but fiscal prosperity is more common in the United States.¹²⁴

6.1: 1973 Commentary on Stewardship and Wealth

The first of such lessons to be examined comes from the 1973 Evangelical Commentary. It is part of a series on the marks of a Christian. Stewardship, which is

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ R. Andrew Chestnut, *Born Again in Brazil: The Pentecostal Boom and the Pathogens of Poverty*, (New Brunswick, Rutgers University Press, 1997), 72.

understood to be the financial caretaking of the master's house, became an important aspect of Christian life to the Church of God. Understanding their lives to be the "house" in which God had entrusted them, proper financial management was expected of the believer. As before, the commentator poses a series of questions for the adherent: "How does the contentment which accompanies godliness fit into our materialistic age? How should it express itself in our lives?"¹²⁵ Drawing off the fact that humankind neither enters nor leaves the mortal life with any material possessions, the writer suggests, the goal of one's life should not be the collection of material goods.¹²⁶ Noteworthy, however, is the lack of a call towards any form of asceticism. The commentator goes on to ask "To what degree, if any, do the necessities of life vary from one age to another?"¹²⁷ This question references 1 Timothy 6:8, in which the apostle Paul decrees that the basic necessities of life of food, clothing, and shelter should be the only material desires of a Christian. Given the changes in the socioeconomic strata of the Church of God membership, it is not a stretch to imply that the commentator here is mindful of the changing necessities of a modern life, even going so far as to pose the question "does Paul's view of necessities fit our age?"¹²⁸ The simple necessities of the apostolic age of Christianity included food and shelter, with little regard for anything else. In the modern era, these necessities have expanded to include some form of income or an education to later attain income, a mode of reliable transportation, and access to proper medical treatment for physical infirmaries. Beyond just these

¹²⁵ (Evangelical Curriculum Commission 1973, 198 – 199)

¹²⁶ Ibid 199.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

necessities for a healthy physical and spiritual life, successes through business are acceptable.

Money itself and the amenities of a successful life are never disparaged by the commentator. Rather, the warning is given that it is the *love* of money that leads to evil and the commentator states that the original text is correctly translated to say as such. Gone is the interpretation that money itself is the root of all evil, and that an ascetic lifestyle is the only way to truly gain righteousness.¹²⁹ Contrast this with Anderson's portrayal that there was ambivalence towards the working class, citing such church leadership as Parham. "(T)he Second Coming of Christ would be preceded by a class conflict in which 'the government, the rich and the churches will be on one side and the masses on the other... Capital must exterminate and enslave the masses or be exterminated... In this death struggle... the rich will be killed like dogs'"¹³⁰

This sentiment in the commentary mirrors that which the sociologist Max Weber came to in his work The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism. Weber interprets the Calvinistic theology concerning the ascetic lifestyle, capitalism, and Protestant faith. Weber comes to the conclusion that wealth, is only ethically improper if it causes temptation for idle behavior, laziness, corruption, and a libertine attitude towards life itself.¹³¹ Weber interprets the Calvinistic view of wealth that not only is the acquisition of money permissible by God, but the believer is morally obligated to engage in capitalistic pursuits as a duty to their calling in life.¹³² Worldly asceticism, the constant laying up of one's money rather than injecting it into the economy, is equal to a desire

¹²⁹ Ibid 199 – 200.

¹³⁰ Anderson 209.

¹³¹ Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, (Mineola, Dover Publications, 2003), 163.

¹³² Ibid.

to be unhealthy as Weber interprets it, and derogatory to the glory of God for the believer to cast off the blessings that had been given to him or her.¹³³ Economic conditions of the adherent and the religion that they adhere to are never separate. No religion ever dismisses economic concern for the preexisting conditions and relationship between the believer and his economic class.¹³⁴ This means that economic concerns and economic class are a concern of religion, whether it is explicitly noted by the religion or not. While it is unlikely that the commentator would come to the exact same conclusion as Weber's Calvinists: it is possible to assert that financial gains within reason and moderation are no longer shunned by the Church of God.

The Commentator cites further scriptures in the text on Timothy and points out the change in Paul's admonitions for those Christians who are more economically blessed than others from the negative to the positive.¹³⁵ The ability of the Christian who is more "well to do" to give charitably and use their possessions to do good and engage in good works is acknowledged as a fundamental trait in the faithful. The wealth of the faithful is to be used whenever possible in the service of God and others.¹³⁶ However, this ability to do good works is tempered. The Commentator asks "How does a Christian differentiate between proper generosity toward needy persons and harmful indulgences of those who prefer to live off of others?"¹³⁷ Those with the ability through wealth and the blessings of God should not help others to the point where they are encouraging behaviors of dependency. Even with this temperament though, the blame for the negative aspects of human existence are not put upon sinful people.

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Weber, *The Sociology of Religion*, 208.

¹³⁵ (Evangelical Curriculum Commission 1973, 201)

¹³⁶ Ibid.

¹³⁷ Ibid.

Where Anderson saw the Pentecostal believers to understand the plight of human kind as a direct result of the sinful nature of certain people, the Commentator makes no such statement.¹³⁸ Anderson even points out that even as late as 1968 that the position of the movement was that the plight of the world was due to man's sinful nature and the Holy Ghost was the only method to save humanity was through the Holy Spirit.¹³⁹ Anderson thoroughly believes that the revolutionary spirit of the Pentecostal movement could have been better put to use through social activism but instead they became decidedly more socially and economically conservative. Through the examination of all the commentaries that were used for this work, not a single instance can be found in which the plight of society is directly attributed to the sinful nature of people. Quite a distance from those who would understand the faithful as being a "great store of hostility and aggressiveness" and a "progressive-revolutionary movement" within Christianity.¹⁴⁰ Where Anderson notes that the Pentecostal movement understood that "the world could only grow worse and would soon be destroyed, there was little point in confronting it and struggling to make it better," the Commentator demonstrates the immense change that the Church of God has gone through since its early days.¹⁴¹ In the lesson's closing, the Commentator interprets Paul's words to Timothy to state that wealth itself should never consume a person's life to the point that its acquisition surpasses the faith unto God, and if it is made to be the center of a person's life that human ruin will be the only result. Wealth, however, does have its place in the life of the faithful, and is not to be shunned completely, as money can be a

¹³⁸ Anderson, 201.

¹³⁹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid 195.

¹⁴¹ Ibid 199.

tool of religion used to alleviate the suffering of others and when used as such *is* considered to be a worthy life goal as it is a reward for faithful service to God.¹⁴²

6.2: 1982 Commentary on Stewardship and Wealth

Looking ahead to the 1982 commentary the material remains the same, as does the basic message, but the focus is on the family, and the effects of finances on the family. This focus on the family was not limited to just the Church of God or the Pentecostal faith. The birth of the Christian Right had occurred in the late Seventies and the rhetoric of family was at the center of that movement as well.¹⁴³ Just as with the scriptures concerning the End of Days prophecy discussed in an earlier chapter, this chapter takes place during the turbulent early eighties in which the United States found itself in the grips of a recession. Financial trouble was tearing families apart, and this fact was not lost on the Church of God and the Commentators.¹⁴⁴ “It is generally accepted fact that problems about finances, or the lack of finances, is the primary cause of tension and discord in a family.”¹⁴⁵ Whether it be from a general lack of finances, or a problem within the household of managing the finances was taken as accepted fact that even the most stable couples could be irreparably damaged by the stress of poor fiscal responsibility.¹⁴⁶ Even those couples with an abundance of wealth were not safe from the stresses of money management. If one mate is thrifty and the other is extravagant, tensions will obviously arise.¹⁴⁷ It is worth noting here that there is no mention of one gender being more prone to this kind of behavior in the Commentaries.

¹⁴² (Evangelical Curriculum Commission 1973, 203)

¹⁴³ Michael Lienesch, *Redeeming America*, (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1993)

¹⁴⁴ (Evangelical Curriculum Commission 1981-1982, 377)

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

How then are the faithful to deal with the perils of a materialistic society and still keep the family structure intact and healthy? The Commentator instructs the faithful on the importance of working together within the family unit to ensure that there is harmony and understanding between husband and wife, becoming not only one flesh, but a partnership in the management of the family finances and possessions.¹⁴⁸ The Commentator helps aid the faithful through a new interpretation of the same lesson from the 1973 Commentary. Good stewardship, the Commentator states, is required of all Christians, the family and the individual equally, so that the faithful can contribute to the kingdom of God. This includes assisting the poor and the needy, providing for the family, and new to the 1982 commentary, saving for emergencies and for retirement.¹⁴⁹ The first inquiry posed by the Commentator speaks directly to addressing the issue of overspending rather than being fiscally sound in the decisions of the faithful. “In a materialistic society, what can the church do to curb the obsession some people have for the possession of material things?”¹⁵⁰ An open admission that the world has changed, and that the change is not something that the church can or should openly fight, rather the church should aid in helping the faithful from getting too entrenched in the practice of covetousness and the ideology that each one must “keep up” with the neighbors.¹⁵¹ Life, the Commentator states, is not made up of wealth and possessions. Covetousness begins when the desire for things exceeds the needs in life and means to procure those needs. The ever increasing desire for things can lead to a “rat race” and cause the

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

faithful to be reduced to ruin.¹⁵² The truly “rich,” according to the Commentary, is the man who has sufficient goods of the world and is able to be content, without turning his entire life into a pursuit of ever more goods, and money. Again, it is worth noting that there is no call to complete asceticism, or to merely stop at the bare essentials of food and clothing, though there is reference to the scripture that Paul admonishes Timothy to be content with those bare essentials.¹⁵³

While the majority of the lesson concentrates on the perils of covetous behavior, there is a very important section concerning debt and debtors. Like the call from the Commentator for the faithful to save for retirement and emergencies, there is a specific warning concerning becoming involved in high risk loans. “What answer,” the author asks, “could be given in order to be free of such an obligation when one is petitioned to be cosigner on a loan?”¹⁵⁴ Citing scripture from Proverbs 22:26 a warning is given against the practice of becoming a guarantor of financial obligations of others, the Commentator explains the dangers of becoming the subject of surety of another person’s debts. Even for friends, this practice is seen as one that will eventually lead to a loss for the believer.¹⁵⁵ The borrower is always beholden to the lender, as the text of Proverbs states, and a cosigner shares this responsibility. Debt puts a person in the in a position of social inferiority.¹⁵⁶ If a believer through his kindness to another suddenly finds himself and his property in danger due to the failure of another to pay back his obligations the strain can harm the believer physically and emotionally through stress and spiritually if the friend is a member of the same congregation or family.

¹⁵² Ibid.

¹⁵³ Ibid 378.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid 379.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

Within a family the strain could cause a rift between relatives that could hurt the entire family, but in a church congregation this kind of behavior could disturb the entire church itself. Spiritual health for individuals, families, and congregations are important for any denomination, not just the Church of God.

Also, a warning is given against the practice of using a home mortgage to the purpose of acquiring easy money utilizing further scripture from Proverbs. Only if all other paths to acquire the needed finance have failed should the avenue of a mortgage be undertaken, the Commentator opines.¹⁵⁷ The most practical advice that can be imparted to people in an increasingly materialistic society such as the United States is included by the Commentator; one should not borrow beyond one's means to repay the debt.¹⁵⁸ To do otherwise would be to risk ruin both financially and spiritually. This financial advice is further proof of the increase in numbers of middle and upper middle class believers in the ranks of the Church of God. Financial stability and good fiscal decision making contribute to spiritual health for the believer and the movement alike, and the author uses the text to ensure the faithful understand this.

6.3: 1989 Commentary on Stewardship and Wealth

The 1988 - 1989 Evangelical Commentary, like the 1982 lesson before it, also concentrates on avoiding covetous behavior and materialism. Again, the faithful are reminded of the strains on a family because of financial difficulty. The Commentator cites from family studies to demonstrate that there is no single period in a couple's life together that is exempt or exclusive to the stresses of running a fiscally sound

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

household.¹⁵⁹ “Much of the unhappiness caused by conflict over money can be avoided,” the author writes, “by Christians if they have a correct understanding of Christian stewardship—of their responsibility before God to use wisely for His glory the material possessions which He entrusts to their care.”¹⁶⁰ This quote is especially telling, since it points out a definitive attitude of the Church of God lesson plans concerning material possessions and wealth. Here, it is understood that the acquisition of wealth and goods are blessings from God to be utilized in the lives of the faithful, not shunned as unneeded excesses of a corrupt society.

The Commentator once again demonstrates the maturation of the Church of God with the explanation of the lesson text of 1 Timothy. The author notes that the Greek translation of the word *contentment* is understood to be much more complex than in everyday usage. The word denotes independence of indifference, a man finding his own resources in himself.¹⁶¹

Another area of key difference with respect to the most recent Commentary in relation to its predecessors is the interpretation of 1 Timothy 6:9. In the past two Commentaries, this verse is not singled out for an intensive discussion, but in the 1989 edition the Commentator goes into some detail concerning Paul’s treatment of the rich. He writes that, “Paul does not criticize men for being rich. He knew that many rich men accept their wealth as a gift and trust from God or even as a burden laid upon them by God and devote themselves too conscientiously to its careful use.”¹⁶² There is a positive attitude towards the more affluent members of society. There is no

¹⁵⁹ (Evangelical Curriculum Commission 1989, 442).

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

¹⁶¹ Ibid 443.

¹⁶² Ibid 444.

admonishment of wealth acquisition through moral means of business or industry. Business and industry are understood to be part of a healthy society and a means for the faithful to help themselves but also understand that the fruits of their endeavors are blessings from God. Here, more than in any of the previously examined texts are the words of Weber so clearly represented by the faithful of the Church of God: “The campaign against the temptations of the flesh and the dependence on external things... [is] not a struggle against the rational acquisition, but against the irrational use of wealth.”¹⁶³ Weber’s words here mirror that of Henry Ward Beecher’s in his *Proverbs from Plymouth Pulpit*.¹⁶⁴ Looking at the lesson on covetous behavior through this new philosophy that the Commentator brings to bear, the changes in attitude since the early days of the Church of God and the greater Pentecostal movement becomes apparent. This attitude sounds like that of the mainstream of American society during the same era.

The lesson closes with what the author views as words of wisdom and caution concerning poor financial planning. Citing Proverbs 22:7, which states that “the borrower is servant to the lender,” the Commentator warns against overspending for the “wants” in life. Family problems can be avoided if care is taken not to squander to gratify self indulgence.¹⁶⁵ The Commentator also warns against the use of easy credit, pointing out the pitfalls just as his predecessor did in the 1982 Commentary. Easy credit lends families towards loose sales resistance, which leads to financial harm.¹⁶⁶ Proper planning on the part of the faithful is key to maintaining financial health, and

¹⁶³Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, 171.

¹⁶⁴ Henry Ward Beecher, *Plymouth Pulpit*, Volume 3 Issue 4.

¹⁶⁵ (Evangelical Curriculum Commission 1989, 445)

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid* 446.

thereby having a stable and healthy home life. All wealth is a gift from God to the faithful, and to be understood not as an evil that leads to ruin, but a blessing that must be correctly used for the glory of God. All of the believers are stewards the Commentator points out, and all stewards must give an account of their stewardship.¹⁶⁷ These words are definitively not those of a fringe group that revels in its status of the poor and destitute. These words are those of practicality and pragmatism, and they clearly demonstrate a change in the Church of God. The world became ever increasingly materialistic, and the Church of God leadership recognized this. Not only did they adapt their position to appeal to their broader and more affluent membership in stating that wealth is not inherently evil, and that if used correctly is evidence of God's blessing for the faithful. They also mirrored prosperity and Word of Faith Evangelicals in touting fiscal responsibility.

6.4: Concluding Thoughts on Stewardship and Wealth

In the end, the Church of God's attitude towards wealth acquisition and capitalism does agree with Anderson's opinion of the revolutionary potential of the early movement.¹⁶⁸ Where Anderson sees this as a failure of the Pentecostal faith to use that revolutionary spirit for social and economic equality, I have shown that these Commentaries demonstrate that the evolution of the Church of God is designed to help the faithful gain prosperity through decidedly capitalistic methods.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

¹⁶⁸ Anderson 236 – 237.

CHAPTER 7: CHURCH LEADERSHIP THROUGH THE DECADES

This chapter will be an expansion on the trend within the Church of God toward a more educated leadership within the ranks of the adherents. As referenced in chapter two there is an observable shift within the Commentary writers and the lessons themselves explaining the need for educated and trained leadership within the church. During the beginnings of the charismatic movement there was little difference between the leadership and the layman, though by the early twentieth century there was a formal structure and hierarchy.¹⁶⁹ Little if any training was required to start a church, lead a revival, or become a preacher. For the Church of God in particular the “fire baptized” doctrine spread across the Eastern Tennessee and Western North Carolina mountains. Three laypersons by the name of William Martin, Joe M. Tipton, and Milton McNabb were evangelists who had left the Methodist and Baptist faith to join the Fire Baptism movement.¹⁷⁰ The problems that plagued the earliest days of the movement were that of a lack of order, societal rejection, and a too literal interpretation of the Wesleyan doctrine of entire sanctification which was misinterpreted by some in the early Church of God to a rejection of medicine and doctor’s care. A form of structure and organized governing was needed to keep the movement intact.¹⁷¹ Anderson examines the early leadership and the educational background they attained. He notes that the records are minimal for some of the leaders but there are some records that survive and point out

¹⁶⁹ Crews, 19.

¹⁷⁰ Synan, *The Holiness Pentecostal Tradition*, 71 – 72.

¹⁷¹ *ibid* 72.

the levels of education reached. Most of the early Pentecostal leadership did achieve some form of secondary education, but beyond that the higher learning was typically Baptist and Methodist seminaries.¹⁷² Some of these schools were very small and obscure colleges with only minimal academic subject matter.¹⁷³ Wacker takes the time to point out that while this may have been true of the earliest leadership, education did play a major role to other members of the Pentecostal Faith and the Church of God. While the earliest church leaders and first generation Pentecostals did disparage learning for learning's sake, as A. C. Holland opined, no education at all was just as much of a problem.¹⁷⁴ The solution was to build schools and develop curriculum that served the purpose of instilling the faithful with education tempered with the Pentecostal message of faith. The overall point is that the Pentecostal leadership valued education as much as the secular world around them.¹⁷⁵ As the times changed and the movement stabilized, the necessity for effective leadership and structure also changed. Advancing to the period examined and the lessons of proper leadership within the church are still just as relevant. Utilizing the scriptures from Acts and the Pauline letters, the Evangelical Commentary adapts lessons of church leadership and order within the ranks. These scriptures are important both historically for the early church and the Church of God because the struggles can be seen as mirror images of each other set apart by almost two millennia.

¹⁷² Anderson, 101 – 102.

¹⁷³ Ibid.

¹⁷⁴ Wacker, 51 – 152.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid.

7.1: 1974 Commentary on Church Leadership

As the ranks of the Church of God swelled during the early and mid-seventies the Commentator notes a divergence from the simplicity of smallness of its beginnings to a diverse population of faithful. Greater size creates a necessity for greater organization within any institution. The leaders of the early church struggled with leadership conflicts and dogmatic questions just as the early Church of God did.¹⁷⁶ As the early church grew and took on a more diverse group of followers, the church leadership faced challenges of aiding the new believers in the understanding of the faith. The commentator utilizes the struggles that the early Christians dealt with and adapts the lessons from Paul and the other early Christian writers to explain the necessity for leadership that can adapt to a changing worldview and a wide demographic of faithful. The lesson that will be examined here looks into leadership and hierarchy problems that the early church faced, and the lessons that the Commentator felt would aid the movement in the growth period in the mid-seventies. The need for properly trained and educated leadership within the movement produces results. The lessons center around problems of dispersion of labor among the early church and the solutions that Paul gives demonstrate the need in the early Church for properly trained leadership. From the earliest days of Christianity, education was valued among the leadership to ensure that the affairs of the Church were handled in order to expand the ranks of the faithful.

The lesson text deals with the problems concerning neglect of the poor during the movement's early days, and the Commentator utilizes the scripture to demonstrate the need for proper leadership that is strong in not only faith and reputation, but equally

¹⁷⁶ (Evangelical Curriculum Commission 1974, 228 – 229)

as important that the leadership be noted for their wisdom.¹⁷⁷ Through the use of properly qualified and trained church leadership the Commentator points out that the gains in church converts in the early days of the movement increased, as did the effectiveness of the overall message. The application to the modern Church of God is clear. The more properly trained and educated the deacons and leaders of the faithful, the greater the benefit to the movement.¹⁷⁸ The author uses the text of Acts 6:3 to metaphorically allude to wise and trained church leadership. “It was suggested that seven men be appointed to supervise the daily food distribution. These men should have a good reputation for honesty and fairness, be full of the Holy Ghost, and be noted *for their wisdom.*”¹⁷⁹

In the early days of the Jesus movement, properly educated leadership led to increased ministry. In the modern era this would lead to a more mainstream message that could appeal to a broader audience of Christian believers and grow the ranks as well. The 1974 Evangelical Commentary moves beyond the scriptures concerning the wisdom of the leadership quickly, as the focus of the lesson is more on avoiding conflict and envy within the believers. This is a common theme for all of the lessons that will be examined in this section, but the 1981 Evangelical Commentary does put more emphasis on the theme of wisdom in the leadership of the church.

The Commentator notes that there are two misconceptions that the Church is attempting to correct. The first is the role of the leader and the second is the nature of the minister.¹⁸⁰ For the purposes of this examination, only the first issue is of concern.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid 229.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid 229.

¹⁸⁰ (Evangelical Curriculum Commission 1981-1982, 63)

Leadership in the Church of God, according to the Commentator, is not that of an authority figure, but of someone who is considered great in his wisdom, and the ability to impart that wisdom to the faithful through the ministry.¹⁸¹ The leadership is to utilize their wisdom to train the faithful to further the work of the Church of God, rather than to rule over the believers. The most proper way to ensure that the leadership meets the standards is through a proper selection process. Once again turning to the scriptures in Acts, the Commentary expands on the role of wisdom and training to pick qualified leadership. The leadership must be competent in administration as well as learned through proper theological ideology. Without the proper training the leadership could be without the ability to deal with delicate feelings and circumstances that could lead to injured feelings and the leadership would be effectively without use and harmful.¹⁸² Once again the Commentator notes successes of the early movement fathers once properly trained leadership was taking care of the business of the faithful. The size of the movement grew because there were wise and well qualified men attending to the logistical needs of the movement.¹⁸³ The role of wisdom and proper training for the leadership in the church is just as important in the modern Church of God as it was to the founders of the Jesus movement in Jerusalem and the Mediterranean.

7.2: 1987 – 1988 Commentary on Church Leadership

The 1987 – 1988 Evangelical Commentary diverges from the pattern of using the same scriptures for repeating lessons, but the message is the same even if it does come from a different section of text. Utilizing the Pauline letter to Corinthians and Timothy, the emphasis on wisdom and proper leadership is still clear. Clear judgment

¹⁸¹ Ibid.

¹⁸² Ibid 64 – 65.

¹⁸³ Ibid 68.

and the ability to follow sound course of action is paramount for the leadership of the movement according to the Commentator.¹⁸⁴ Interestingly, the Commentary even puts an emphasis on those who have useful manual skills, putting equal value on church leadership that can benefit the faithful through skilled labor. The importance of all forms of wisdom is displayed through the scriptural references that demonstrate a benefit of greater outpourings of the spirit and growth of the ranks of the faithful.¹⁸⁵

Another divergence from the previous lesson texts deals with the discernment of the gift of tongues. Speaking in tongues is another of the gifts of the Spirit which stand as one of the major points within the Pentecostal faith. In the book of Acts 2:2 - 12 the apostles were given the ability to speak in foreign tongues on the day of Pentecost while meeting in the upper room. The scholarly term for tongues is glossolalia. While the Commentator emphasizes the importance of the miracle of glossolalia, he also stresses the importance that those under the effects of the spirit remain in control of their cognitive abilities, not succumbing to ecstasy or a loss of self-control.¹⁸⁶ Proper discernment of the gift of tongues and interpretation of the utterances are as much a part of proper wisdom of church leadership because it dismisses the skeptics and cynical nay-sayers who would attempt to stereotype the faithful as the fanatics of old.¹⁸⁷ The leadership must have the knowledge to increase the numbers of the faithful through the utilization of the gifts of the spirit and the outpouring of faith, but also to ensure that the manifestation of these gifts stays within the limits of acceptability that the Church of

¹⁸⁴ (Evangelical Curriculum Commission 1987 – 1988, 416)

¹⁸⁵ Ibid.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid 417 – 418.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid 417.

God has established.¹⁸⁸ The author speaks directly to the correct manifestation of the gifts of the spirit concerning tongues by pointing out to the faithful “(A)lthough one who speaks in tongues never loses control of himself, his mind, his intellect and his understanding become quiescent.”¹⁸⁹

Weber notes that the leadership of various religions has always utilized its intellectualism to steer the destiny of the movement, so long as sacred scriptures existed which would have required interpretation and teaching of the content. Whether the intellectual class is of the priesthood or political authorities of the movement, the influence has been comprehensive.¹⁹⁰ Weber’s interpretation of the importance of intellectualism within a religious movement can be manifest by the Church of God in the same way he noticed in the ancient scripture based religions that he directly studied.¹⁹¹

From the earliest days of the Protestant movement, there has been no distinctive intellectual class with a life pattern characteristic of the ancient priestly cults but a rise in intellectualism amongst the faithful signifies a change in the socioeconomic strata of the adherent.¹⁹² The middle and upper classes are attracted to a growth of popular religious intellectualism, especially in the Judeo-Christian tradition dating back to the late forms of Rabbinic Judaism and Pauline missionary communities.¹⁹³

7.3: Concluding Thoughts on Church Leadership

The evidence of this growth of, and emphasis on, educated and properly trained leadership marks a sharp contrast from the understanding that scholars such as

¹⁸⁸ Ibid.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid 418.

¹⁹⁰ Weber, *Sociology of Religion*, 118.

¹⁹¹ Ibid.

¹⁹² Ibid 134.

¹⁹³ Ibid.

Anderson held concerning Pentecostalism. No longer do the members shun knowledge and proper education from worthwhile educational institutions. As the prevalence of learned leadership increases through the generations of the Church of God there has been an increase of higher educated and more affluent members. The message of the Church of God also tempers itself away from its early doctrines and previous interpretations of the scriptures. The Church of God has begun adopting language similar to the mainline denominations which has lent itself to further development and growth of the movement.

The growth of intellectualism and education, along with the acceptance of greater economic success and proper training of stewardship for the faithful are the most important adaptations that the Church of God has made throughout the decades examined. It is clear through the interpretation of the scriptures that the Commentators examine that the movement will only continue to make progress in these areas and continue its journey towards establishing the Church's place among the mainstream denominations. In fact the very existence of the Commentaries proves the emphasis on education and intellectual growth within the Church of God. The Commentaries are meant to be teaching aids for church leadership, not restricted to just the pastor. If the leadership was ignorant, backwards, and uninformed, the education of the laity would be neglected, as the pastor could not handle the work load. The Commentator in each cycle of lessons examined puts emphasis on the distribution of labor within the church as well. This distribution of labor is only possible thanks to the education of the adherent as they progress from laity to leaders within the Church of God.

CHAPTER 8: CONCLUSIONS

The Evangelical Commentary has served the Church of God for many decades as its Sunday school and Bible study literature. Its consistent format and lesson aids ensure that even the laity of the faithful can serve as the instructor for these lessons. The Commentaries are an invaluable part of the Church of God's literature and curriculum concerning the spiritual and personal development of the faithful and their families. As was demonstrated in the chapters on healing and finance, the Commentary puts special emphasis on the personal well-being of the believer, giving advice and warning about making good decisions in the daily lives of members while not absent of spiritual influence, these lessons weave a modern interpretation of the biblical text into the challenges of life in modern day America for the Church of God members.

As this project has demonstrated, the Evangelical Commentary demonstrates a clear change in the perceptions, concepts, and foci of the Church of God. As the society around them adapted to the fast paced and turbulent lifestyle of the 1970s and 80s, the leadership in the Church also adapted.

The Evangelical Commentary followed the Church of God in their efforts to ensure that the church leadership was well educated in either a traditional college or seminary, straying from the older model of having the "call" dictate fully those who are in the position of leadership for the members. The writers of the Commentaries have gone from general laity whom has become pastors and church leaders to better educated and qualified individuals in the Church of God leadership, as noted in chapter 2

explaining the Commentaries. With the focus turning towards a more scholarly approach to the leadership and the educators of the faithful, it follows that the substance of those lessons would also turn to a more modern focus, which is evident in the lessons on the creation narrative and the prophecy concerning the end of days. The literal interpretation of the text continues, but emphasis is put on an understanding that these texts were written for the audience of the day, and modern society requires a modern and more open interpretation of an ancient text. The Church of God realizes that understanding that the earth was created in six days, or that it is only a few thousand years old cannot still be expected to taken as irrefutable truth in the face of scientific advances throughout time.

The same sentiment can be made in the area of faith healing. A reliance on solely prayer, laying on of hands, and belief led to the stigma that the Church worked so hard to rid itself of. A far better interpretation of those same scriptures referenced above is that the miracles of God can be found in doctor's care and modern medicinal advancements. Science has an important place in the understanding of both the beginning and the end narratives in the holy text of the faithful. This clearly demonstrates the change in attitude of the denomination that was once thought of as a social pariah and millenarian cult filled with ecstasies on the fringe of society. The poor and destitute that Anderson saw as the core members of the Church of God, simple and backwards folk from the Appalachian Mountains, have diversified to include many to affluent and well educated adherents.

It is my conclusion that the Church of God has continued its growth and adaptation that Mickey Crews demonstrated in his work, but at the same time retains

faithfulness to the text, as Wacker noted as well. Considering the layout of the Evangelical Commentary and the continuation of its printing and use by the Church of God, it too will be a source for insight into the faithful of the Church of God rather than having to rely on case studies or official publications from the Church of God leadership. With the continued publication of the Evangelical Commentaries by the Church of God there will also continue to be an opportunity to continue this study as the believers face new challenges and changes in the twenty first century.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Anderson, Robert Mapes. *Vision of the Disinherited: The Making of American Pentecostalism*. Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1979.
- Beecher, Henry Ward.
- Boyer, Paul. *When Time Shall Be No More: Prophecy Belief in Modern American Culture*. Cambridge: Oxford University Press, 1992.
- Chestnut, R. Andrew. *Born Again in Brazil: The Pentecostal Boom and the Pathogens of Poverty*. New Brunswick : Rutgers University Press, 1997.
- Commission, Evangelical Curriculum. *Evangelical Commentary*. Cleveland TN: Pathway Press, 1971 - 1992.
- Crews, Mickey. *The Church of God, A Social History*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1990.
- Frykholm, Amy Johnson. *Rapture Culture: Left Behind in Evangelical America*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004.
- Greidanus, Sidney. *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1988.
- Hanson, Paul D. *The Dawn of Apocalyptic*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979.
- Harrell Jr., David Edwin. *All Things Are Possible: The Healing and Charismatic Revivals in Modern America*. Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1975.
- Hendershot, Heather. *Shaking the World for Jesus*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004.
- Le Barr, Weston. *And They Shall Take Up Serpents: Psychology of the Southern Snake-Handling Cult*. New York: Schocken Books, 1969.
- Niebuhr, Reinhold. *The Nature and Destiny of Man Vol 1: Human Nature*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996.
- . *The Nature and Destiny of Man Vol 2: Human Destiny*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996.
- Poloma, Margaret M. *The Assemblies of God at the Crossroads*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1989.

Stephens, Randall J. *The Fire Spreads: Holiness and Pentecostalism in the American South*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009.

Synan, Vinson. *The Holiness Pentecostal Tradition*. Grand Rapids: William B Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1971.

Wacker, Grant. *Heaven Below: Early Pentecostals and American Culture*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001.

Weber, Max. *Sociology of Religion*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1991.

—. *The Protestant Ethic and The Spirit of Capitalism*. Mineola: Dover Publications Inc, 2003.