

JOHN MORRISON, THE KLAN, AND THE AFRICAN-AMERICAN CHURCH OF GOD

By Dr. Merle D. Strege, *Historian of the Church of God*

On December 28, 1933 Church of God ministers in Ohio reiterated their earlier resolution requesting the elimination of the college program at Anderson College in favor of retaining only the seminary. The December resolution further resolved to call for a general ministerial insistence that "...the School be placed in the hands of, and be directed and managed by, men who are known to be wholly committed to this TRUTH [such as 'the present-day call of God to his people to come out of all sectarianism, Papal and Protestant, the modern Babylon']; men who can and will pass it on, both in theological instruction and in burning reformational emphasis, to the body of students."

The resolution targeted college leadership. That John Morrison was to stand for ratification the following June is one of the best-known elements of this story. We should note that the resolution expressed a concern for college leadership, of which Russell Olt was, by late 1933, also a controversial member. Morrison's impending ratification vote made him but the first and most visible target. This narrative has conventionally described the issue as a contest between Anderson College and Ohio ministers, but there is more to this story. Within two months of the publication of the second Ohio Resolution, Morrison received letters from two African-American ministers in Ohio.

These letters shed light on a lesser-known dimension of the controversy between Ohio ministers and Anderson College in the 1930s. In late February 1934, Hammie Jeter wrote Morrison with a protest that, even though Jeter attended the first two days of the Toledo meeting and chaired the "colored ministers" in Ohio, neither he nor his brethren knew anything of the December resolution. As Jeter wrote Morrison, "[W]e the colored ministers were not consulted about it until the action was taken and I felt it unfair to us to say all the ministers of the state, but leave it as it is."¹

Only a few days earlier another black minister, Joseph Crosswhite, manager of the West Middlesex meeting, also wrote Morrison and included a set of charges that complained more pointedly about the rift between white and black ministeriums in Ohio. But Crosswhite commended Morrison for his "attitude towards the colored students that have attended the college, also our race."²

Morrison replied to Crosswhite taking pride in Gabriel Dixon's graduation the previous spring. Morrison also told Crosswhite of the college's plan to confer that June an honorary doctorate on S. P. Dunn, pastor of Langley Avenue Church of God in Chicago. In the course of his letter Morrison explained that early in his life he had read a biography of Booker T. Washington which had influenced Morrison's growing appreciation of African-Americans and their effort to advance their standing in American society. He also noted that his longstanding support of African-Americans, reaching back more than a decade to an article printed in the *Gospel Trumpet*.

The article to which Morrison referred had been published in 1923 under the title, "The Menace of Ku Klux Klanism."³ Morrison's "menace" was the so-called second Klan revival of the early 1920's. He labeled the Klan "un-christian" because of its secrecy and because its class-antagonism. As Morrison put it, "Any movement that has for its special target of antagonism any special class of people is narrow and unchristian."⁴ Morrison argued that such antagonism was incompatible with the teachings and spirit of Jesus. Morrison also identified the means by which he believed the Klan made some inroads into the Church of God. Not only the avowed enemy of African-Americans, the Klan also targeted Jews and Catholics, and it

¹ H. Jeter to John A. Morrison, February 28, 1934, Archives of the Church of God, AC Box 15 File 5

² Joseph Crosswhite to John A. Morrison, February 24, 1934, Archives of the Church of God, AC Box 15, File 4

³ *Gospel Trumpet*, February 15, 1923, pp. 7-

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 7

was this last posture that attracted some Church of God people. Morrison saw that anti-Catholicism furnished the Klan with “a leverage of power. It has caused many an honest Protestant who was eager to deal a death blow to Catholicism to yoke up with the Klan.”⁵

This notion that the enemy of my enemy must be my friend was folly as far as Morrison was concerned. His argument was pure Missouri common sense: The fact that some snakes are natural predators of mice does not warrant turning snakes loose in a mice-infested house.

Morrison had little good to say about the Roman Catholic Church, but in the Ku Klux Klan he saw the evil of what he termed an un-American racial bigotry. From his earliest days at Anderson Bible Training School his personal commitment to racial justice—paralleled by Russell Olt’s—ensured that the school’s doors remained open to people of color whether on the faculty, as in the case of Jamaican Amy Lopez or students such as Gabriel Dixon. This policy meant that when the question of Morrison’s ratification rose in 1934 he could count on the support of many African-American ministers.

Originally written for the Church of God Historical Society newsletter, *The Historian*. Spring 2010

⁵ *Ibid*