

Camp Meeting Sermons of 1929

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Two volumes in the Archives of the Church of God preserve sermons from Anderson Camp Meeting. Researchers can open collections of selected sermons from the meetings of 1913 and 1928 for a glimpse of some of the issues on the minds of Church of God preachers in those years. It's unfortunate that no such volume preserves the sermons of the camp meeting for 1929, one of the more contentious gatherings in the history of the annual meeting. Of the sermons delivered that summer, no fewer than three addressed the subject of Christian unity. Three of the best known preachers in the movement turned their thoughts to the subject that had held the movement's theological attention since earlier that spring.

A few months before the 1929 Camp meeting Russell Byrum delivered his now famous address on the subject of Christian unity. The paper clearly departed from traditional Church of God teaching on this doctrine. At the heart of the matter was Byrum's refusal to conform to what he regarded as the "creedish and sectish attitude"¹ held by many in the movement. He also opposed the common belief that the Church of God movement possessed all truth; rather, thought Byrum, the movement should be progressing into fuller truth. Consequently, he also opposed withholding Christian fellowship from Christians of different theological opinions.

Byrum's departure from generally held views and those of *Gospel Trumpet* Editor F. G. Smith was readily apparent, to none more than Birdie Smith and R. L. Berry. Birdie was F. G. Smith's wife, and Berry had assumed the office of managing editor at the *Trumpet* after Byrum left to become a full-time teacher at the college. The two brought heresy charges against Byrum within months of his address.

Byrum's trial and acquittal at the 1929 Camp meeting is a story often told. Similarly, the sermon delivered at the meeting by Byrum's once and future pastor, E. A. Reardon, has also received more than a little attention. Barry Callen included the text in his anthology, *Following the Light*.² Reardon attacked the idea that the Church of God was the hub of Christendom. Moreover, he declared, Christ himself would ignore any "reformation exclusiveness" and cultivate instead the unity which rests in himself.

Less well known are two additional sermons delivered that same June. F. G. Smith, champion of the traditional theology, took the Camp meeting pulpit to reaffirm positions that by 1929 he had often stated in book and the pages of the *Trumpet*. Indeed, not long after Byrum had read his paper to Indiana ministers Smith reprinted his own 1928 Camp meeting sermon on the same theme. It is not too much to assume that for at least a year Smith sniffed doctrinal change on the winds and set his mind to oppose it. Camp meeting 1929 gave him another opportunity to restate traditional doctrine.

Theologically between Reardon and Smith stood A. F. Gray, pastor of Park Place Church of God, and the third to address the topic of unity. Chairman of the Anderson College trustees, Gray was well on his way to becoming one of the movement's most widely respected ministers. His sermon on Christian unity reflected this mediating stance. Titled "The Leaven of the Reformation," the sermon stipulated a definition of reformation which regarded the restoration of the church as a developmental process, going even so far as to assert that even the New Testament church itself had room for improvement. Like Smith, Gray considered the Christian church's apostasy as given. But in a related point he observed that the Jews were not the sole people of God even though they were his chosen ones. In this Gray shared a perception in Reardon's more inflammatory discourse. Israel's mistake, said Gray, was their exclusivism, "...thinking that they were the only people God could have. They did not consider that God is the God of the whole [human] race and no respecter of persons. Thus they lost their opportunity and went into darkness." In case his hearers missed the point, Gray added, "There is a lesson in this for us."

¹ Russell Byrum Journal, January 17, 1930, Russell Byrum Papers, Archives of the Church of God

² Barry Callen, *Following the Light*, Anderson: Warner Press, 2000.

Today we think of the North American Convention as an occasion for inspiration and education, and it is. Such expectations were also true of much earlier gatherings. But the preaching history of the 1929 Camp meeting suggests that then sermons were also used to set brothers and sisters straight, or to set them thinking.

Originally written for the Church of God Historical Society newsletter, *The Historian*. Spring 2011