

A Historical Perspective

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Most of us remember the dark days the Church of God endured during the Nineties. The publishing aspect of Warner Press unraveled. The reorganized national offices took their first steps, and sometimes they resembled a halting lurch more than a confident march into the future. And of course, the disclosures and subsequent trials of Church Extension officials left scars that remain to this day.

During that period, I was asked more than once whether those were the worst days in the history of the Church of God. My reply was often greeted with surprise because in my view, dark as it was, the Nineties were not the worst days of the Church of God. Several other candidates presented themselves. One thinks of the travails endured by E. E. Byrum during the entire period of his service as editor, or the decade of trouble spawned by the *Watchman on the Wall*. Then there is the trouble that brewed between F. G. Smith and John Morrison which vexed their respective institutions from 1929 to 1934. I do not wish to sponsor nominations for the title, “The Worst Days of the Church of God.” My point, rather, is that a little historical knowledge gives us a clearer perspective on our own times.

This is particularly important for Church of God folk born between, say, 1940 and 1960. Why is this so? It is my judgment that this age cohort grew up during a period of great advance and even prosperity in the Church of God. They were too young to have much awareness of World War II, and even the Slacum controversy that bothered Church of God leaders did not touch many young lives.

But these boys and girls of the 1940s and ‘50s did experience much of what I call the “salad days” of the Church of God. Churches were growing, new church buildings were being constructed, and World Service budgets were met. In fact, national church agencies were so flush with cash that three of them (the old World Service Division, Warner Press, and the Women’s Missionary Society) combined to capitalize the church’s new pension fund with an amount equivalent to in excess of \$8.4 million in 2012.

Even in the field of sports those were great days; under Bob and Jim Macholtz Anderson College’s basketball and football teams enjoyed unparalleled success. By 1965 the basketball team had twice advanced to the NAIA national tournament. The football team rarely lost a game during the second half of the Fifties into the early Sixties. The point is, if this was the limit of one’s knowledge of the Church of God, he or she would think that the history of the movement was a march from victory unto victory. But given a longer view and in consideration of the several controversies that have vexed the movement, the “salad years” may actually be an anomaly. Historical perspective helps us sort out that judgment.

Such a perspective also gives us a standpoint from which to assess developments and practices of our own day. Lately I’ve been recommending Thomas Bergler’s fine analysis of American youth ministry strategies between 1940 and roughly 1970, *The Juvenilization of American Christianity*. Bergler examines ministries of mainline Protestants, Catholics, and Evangelicals. He finds that the latter succeeded more than the former two when it came to retaining young people within a Christian orbit. However, success came with a significant price tag, for Bergler finds that while Evangelicals succeeded at keeping youth in the fold, so to speak, the level of basic Christian understanding was minimal and remains so among those who are now adults.

One could add that the level of biblical knowledge is no higher; a shocking percentage of Americans believe Joan of Arc was Noah’s wife and few Evangelical high school students can identify “Blessed are the poor in Spirit” as from the Sermon on the Mount. One of my very bright seminary students has been comparing his own experience in a Church of God youth group with Bergler’s description of Evangelicals and finds very close similarities. In this case, then, the knowledge offered by a little historical perspective provides the basis from which to critically assess the successes and failures of youth ministry in some quarters of the Church of God.

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