

F. G. Smith and John Morrison: Fleshing out the Story

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My next major research and writing project is a centennial history of Anderson University. A finished manuscript is not due for quite some time, but it is a large task that will require every bit of my free time. The story of Anderson University cannot properly be told apart from its relationship with the Church of God, which means the story of the movement must figure prominently in the University's history. The nature of that relationship has changed over the decades, but there is no denying the reciprocal influence Anderson and the movement have had on each other. This mutual relationship has often been happy, but at other times frayed. At no moment was this anymore the case than the years from 1929 to 1934, a period I have elsewhere described as the "Anderson College Controversy."

Last summer I began my research by reading several years worth of John Morrison's correspondence and rather quickly found myself reading about this critical period in the life of the church and college. One of the wonderful things about fresh research is that we find ourselves learning and rethinking events and personalities we thought we knew, only to see afresh in a new light. Until reading Morrison's letters, my understanding of the controversy had been framed largely by Robert Reardon's *The Early Morning Light*. While the main lines of Reardon's narrative remain, I am learning there is more to the story.

The controversy significantly involved Russell Olt, which is to say that it was much more than a conflict between Morrison and Smith. Late in 1932, Olt arranged a psychology experiment involving Anderson dentist Rollie Bennett and Mary Husted, a college student. She agreed to undergo hypnosis by Olt, and Bennett agreed to extract one of her teeth without anesthesia. The experiment was a success, but the local newspaper picked up the story. When it spread throughout the region a public relations nightmare was created with Olt squarely at the center. As ministers across the United States learned of his experiment they objected both individually and corporately. Ministerial assemblies in Kentucky, Ohio, and Western Washington each sent resolutions to the College expressing their disapproval. Washington ministers registered the strongest objections, going so far as to request "the removal from the school [of] those connected with such teaching, feeling it would be best for the work."

Some friends of the school feared Olt would need to step down. At the time of the Olt imbroglio, the widely-popular revival preacher, W. A. Monk, was living and serving in the Pacific Northwest as field secretary for the Board of Church Extension and also as a field agent for the College. Earlier in his life, Monk had run for political office, an experience which taught him to assess group reaction and feeling. In October 1933, he wrote Morrison to express the opinion that Olt would likely need to resign for the sake of the school's reputation in the church. Furthermore, Monk believed he would need to remain in the Pacific Northwest for some time in order to repair the damage done by Olt. There were other friends of the college who also criticized Olt and the school. Former student Lester Schrock wrote from New Springfield, Ohio, "The school is sure in the limelight as at any gathering of ministers where I have been since leaving school there is unfavorable discussion of it, and such *dumb tricks* [Schrock's emphasis] as the one Dean Olt did sure keep it in the limelight, and I think not for the good of the institution." Schrock added, "All things are lawful but not expedient."

Against Monk's advice, Morrison adamantly refused even to consider Olt's resignation. Perhaps Morrison had learned his lesson after accepting Russell Byrum's resignation in 1929. Perhaps Morrison believed that the college's future hinged on Olt's professional survival. The president's motives have yet to be uncovered, and they may never see the light of day. Two things we do know. In 1933 Olt wrote an open letter to the church in which he apologized. We also know that present day researchers will have to decide whether Olt's career was actually at stake or that, as Robert Reardon described the affair, it was a "tempest in a teapot."

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