

A Church Takes Shape:

The Michigan churches of Christ, founded by Gilbert Cranmer in the late 1850's, and the Marion, Iowa, Church of Jesus Christ, founded in 1860, soon learned of each other and began to publish *The Hope of Israel* in 1863. With a firm stand for premillennial adventism, Christ's reign on earth, and weekly Sabbath observance, those Church of God (Seventh Day) pioneers opposed the "revelations" of Ellen White in favor of full loyalty to Scripture. How successful they were in this noble enterprise will be considered here.

Two questions guide the doctrinal development of any group: 1) What is truth? and 2) How is it determined? For Christians, the answers require a scriptural approach and correct methods of interpreting the Bible. Properly guided, in-depth studies of God, redemption, the church, and even history will lead to certain conclusions and doctrines. Good methods in theology must generate conviction, not vice versa.

The new CoG7's attempt at systematic doctrine is found in the first *Hope* (1863). Our pioneers' affirmation of "no hope of eternal life but through Christ" is gratifying to all who love the gospel, even as we recognize their conflict over the key issue of Jesus' nature and identity.

Most of our early pioneers espoused the Arian view of Christ. Named for its defender at

the Council of Nicea (A.D. 325), Arianism holds that the Father alone was truly God (a co-equal Son would make two Gods!); that the Son was created by the Father in time; and that Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are separate — not uni-plural — entities.

Apart from lacking good biblical support, this view of the Godhead has serious implications for the gospel of eternal salvation. It also shows that for the first one hundred years, our concept of Deity was more Old Testament and Jewish (monadic) than it was New Testament and Christian (dyadic).

An Old Testament emphasis was also seen in our pioneers' thought and practice about Lord's Supper. While the Michigan churches are reported to have observed communion monthly in some cases, annual observance at the time of Passover gradually became an important norm for the evolving Church. Later generations often placed as much emphasis on Hebrew regulations for the "Christian Passover" as they did on the meaning of Christ's sacrifice.

What shaped our early pioneers' thinking in these regards? A plausible answer is that they, to some degree, stumbled into some potholes strewn along the road of anyone who would be guided by "the Bible and the Bible alone" — equivalent to the Protestant motto of *sola scriptura*. Students who stay isolated

from the best of historic Christian thought, from generally accepted rules of interpretation, and from other lovers of the Word often find themselves adopting views that later prove deficient (see 2 Peter 1:20b).

We should not be shocked or embarrassed that our founders missed a few marks along the way, even as we celebrate most of the doctrinal heritage they bequeathed us and continue their disciplined search of "the Bible alone" as our final word in faith and practice.

Our pioneers, fully committed to scriptural authority as they were, did not study in a vacuum. Each of them was undoubtedly influenced by the church of his youth. Evidence also shows that several of them learned from, if not joined for a time, a nineteenth century sect called Christian Connexion. Of this group, the *Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge* says:

Their leading purposes, at first, appear to have been, not so much to establish any peculiar and distinctive doctrines, as to assert, for individuals and churches, more liberty and independence in relation to matters of faith and practice, to shake off the authority of human creeds and the shackles of prescribed modes and forms, to make the Bible their only guide, claiming the right for every man to be his own expositor of it, to judge, for himself, what are its

1863 to 1914

doctrines and requirements, and in practice, to follow more strictly the simplicity of the apostles and primitive Christians. . . . No member is subject to the loss of church fellowship on account of his sincere and conscientious belief, so long as he manifestly lives a pious and devout life. . . . Each church is considered an independent body, possessing exclusive authority to regulate and govern its own affairs. . . . The education of many of the ministers of the connexion, who universally preach extempore, is defective. . . . They have considered the preparation of the heart more important than the embellishment of the mind. (*Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*).

The influence of the Christian Connexion upon our founders, including Gilbert Cranmer, may help explain why CoG7's early years were often characterized by a local autonomy, anti-organizational sentiments, and rejection of historic Christian teachings. (To read more on Christian Connexion, visit www.mun.ca/rels/restmov/texts/jvhimes/CC-ERK.HTM).

The change of the Church's name reflects the Connexion's emphasis on "Bible names for Bible things." Congregations in Michigan were first organized under the name Church of Christ. The switch to Church of God started in Iowa, the Missouri churches adopted the new name

in 1875, and the choice became unanimous in 1884. *Seventh-day* was added in 1923. The term *church of God* in the Bible is usually seen not as prescriptive usage but as generic reference to all God's people in Christ.

We continue to respect the Church's emphasis on the authority of Scripture and salvation only through the Lord Jesus. Reading our history helps us accept the fact that a full range of biblical scholarship and Christ-centeredness did not quickly accompany the efforts of our pioneers. They understood the importance of Christ and the cross, but they often viewed the New Testament through the lens of the Old. As new covenant believers, we have learned to reverse that, understanding the

Old Testament through the lens of our Lord's death and resurrection.

The Church has been described as "a moving movement." Like a train, its landscape and passengers change. Some get off and new ones come onboard as it moves down the track of time. We have much to learn and appreciate about our church's history, about the faith – and foibles – of our fathers. May we, the current passengers, be inspired to even greater commitment to Jesus and the values of His kingdom.

– BA

Pioneer churchman Jacob Brinkerhoff



Fifty Years in Focus

1860's - CoG7 expands south from Michigan and Iowa into Missouri

1874 - Sabbatarian Adventist Conference organizes in Missouri; S. C. B. Williams, president

1884 - Michigan, Iowa, Missouri, Kansas, and Nebraska leaders form the first General Conference; A. C. Long, president

1888 - After twenty-plus years under Christian Publishing Association in Marion, Iowa (H. E. Carver was a key leader there), the *Sabbath Advocate* magazine moves to Stanberry, Missouri

1895 - CoG7 expands into Oklahoma territory after land rush there

1899 - General Conference incorporates in Gentry County, Missouri

1905 - CoG7 suffers in dispute over *Bible Advocate* editor W. C. Long

1914 - Upon retirement of Jacob Brinkerhoff, Andrew N. Dugger of Nebraska becomes BA editor and G. C. chairman