

About the Churches of God

Background

These present day Churches were re-established in the period 1892-94. They are designated in all legal documents as *'The Churches of God in the Fellowship of the Son of God, the Lord Jesus Christ'*, on the basis of 1 Corinthians 1:9. This distinguishes them from other bodies of Christians, which have since arisen and have adopted the title *'Churches of God'*.

Most of those composing the re-established Churches were formerly associated with companies of believers generally known as *'Open Brethren'*, mostly located in the British Isles. They subscribed in general to the basic doctrines on which the latter movement took its stand from about 1827 onwards.

During this period (1827-1892) the Lord graciously gave increasing light on the New Testament pattern of Church constitution, and in particular, on such subjects as *'the House of God'* and *'the Kingdom of God'*. There was also, however, what some regarded as retrogression by some Assemblies, for example, in the receiving of unbaptized believers to the Breaking of Bread, and a weakening in separation from the established Churches from which the early brethren had for the most part seceded.

In 1888 leaders who were deeply exercised about these matters commenced publication of a quarterly magazine entitled *'Needed Truth'*. Their purpose was to use the magazine to expound the distinctive truths

of the House of God and the Kingdom of God; to urge the New Testament unity of the Churches of God in one fellowship; and to draw attention to the loose practices which were developing in the Brethren movement.

It became increasingly evident that these objectives were not acceptable to the greater number of Open Brethren Assemblies. In July 1891 a conference was held at Windermere, England, so that differences could be explored and, if possible, resolved. This conference revealed a wide divergence in doctrine and practice relating to the matters under review.

It became evident that there could be no general expression within the Brethren movement of what the minority held firmly to be the doctrine of the Lord on the House of God and the Kingdom of God.

In the years 1892-94, and after much searching of heart, a number of believers withdrew from their former associations and came together as Churches of God in accordance with what they deemed to be the apostolic pattern as given in Acts 2:41,42.

Many did so at great personal cost and no reason other than loyalty to the revealed will of God would have induced them to do so. It demanded courage and faith. They were ridiculed and maligned, but the movement survived.

Development

Arising out of emigration from the United Kingdom in the early years of the 20th century, and in fellowship with the existing Churches, Churches of God were established in Canada, U.S.A., Australia and New Zealand.

In 1920 the first missionary party went to Nigeria where a fruitful work has developed. Churches of God have been established in various places which have over the years produced their own evangelists.

In 1947 a working party went to Burma (now termed Myanmar) in answer to a call from Burmese Christians who had been studying the Scriptural teaching of the New Testament Churches during the isolation of the years of the Second World War. That work expanded and today there are Churches of God in North and South Burma.

In 1958 missionaries from the Burmese field crossed to India, where, through the untiring efforts of labourers from the U.K., and in conjunction with indigenous help, the gospel has reached many and a testimony has been built up in the south-eastern states of Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh, and in Goa on the west coast.

In the 1950's the Churches of God in North America began radio broadcasts. These have been expanded and both gospel and teaching broadcasts have been regularly transmitted globally. Follow-up of this work has seen the establishment of Churches of God in Belgium, Ghana, Jamaica, Malawi and the Philippines and continues today.

A summary of the teachings and practices of the Churches of God

They believe in:

- 1 The verbal inspiration of Scripture. The Bible is the Word of God; it is God-breathed. Its words are living and these alone can satisfy the deep need of the souls of men. *2 Tim. 3:16; Heb. 4:12; 2 Pet. 1:20,21.*
- 2 The Holy Trinity: Father, Son and Holy Spirit, eternally one God. *Deut. 6:4; Isa. 57:15; 2 Cor. 13:14; Heb. 9:14.*
- 3 The Sovereignty of God. *Rom. 9:10-29.*
- 4 The fact that men and women are sinners. By the fall of man in the Garden of Eden death has come through sin and has passed unto all men, for that all have sinned. The inheritance of sin means that by nature men and women are incapable of finding out God other than by His revelation to them which takes place through His Word. *Job 11:7; Rom. 3:23; 5:6-12.*
- 5 The deity, the virgin birth, the incarnation, the perfect life and atoning death of the eternal Son of God; His resurrection and ascension. *Matt. 1:23; Luke 1:26-38; John 20; Acts 10:38-40; Rom. 4:25.*
- 6 The coming of the Holy Spirit to convict the world of sin, and indwell the believer. *John 14:16,17; 16:8-15; Acts 2:1-13.*
- 7 The apostles' teaching, precisely given by the Lord and accurately preserved in the New Testament Scriptures, intended to be the form of Christian witness till the end of the present age. *Acts 2:42; Rom. 6:17; Heb. 2:3; Jude 3.*

They believe that:

8 At the new birth, through personal acceptance of Christ as Saviour and Lord, a person becomes a child of God, and a member of the Church which is His Body, into which he or she is baptized in the one Spirit. *John 1:12; 1 Cor. 12:13; 2 Cor. 5:17; Gal. 3:26,28.*

9 No person, born again, and therefore baptized into the Church which is the Body of Christ, can ever be lost again. Therefore the teaching of the '*falling away*' of believers, so far as eternal life is concerned, is false. *John 10:27-30; 1 Cor. 3:15.*

10 Following conversion, otherwise called the new birth, and the accompanying baptism in the Holy Spirit into the one Body, the Lord's command is that the disciple should then be baptized by immersion in water and received into a Church of God. Anyone seeking fellowship who is already baptized as a believer into the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, would not be re-baptized. Infant sprinkling, however, is unacceptable as unscriptural and performed upon an unconverted child. *Matt. 28:18-20; Acts 2:41-42; 10:47,48; 1 Cor.12:13.*

11 The Scriptural terms '*the Church the Body*' and '*the Church and Churches of God*' are not interchangeable for they do not describe the same people. All believers from Pentecost until the Lord returns are members of the Church the Body and can never be severed from it. A Church of God is the unit of testimony in any town or village no matter if it meets as more than one company. It is composed solely of disciples who have been baptized and added together according to the New Testament pattern, in fellowship with Churches of God world-wide. From such Churches of God erring saints may depart or be excommunicated, thus losing their place in the Church of God locally but retaining membership of the Church the Body. *1 Cor. 1:9; 5:5,13; 16:19; Gal. 1:2; Matt. 16:17-19; 18:15-20, Acts 2:41-42.*

12 The Church the Body is not viewed in Scripture as synonymous with the House or Temple of God. In the New Testament it is the Churches of God, linked together in a fellowship of Assemblies, which together comprise the House and the Temple. The existence of the House of God is presented in the New Testament as conditional on obedience. Just as a Church of God can cease to exist, so too, can the House of God.

Eph. 2:20-22; Heb. 3:6; 1 Pet. 2:4-10; Rev. 2:5.

13 'Miraculous' gifts, such as speaking in tongues, belong to the apostolic era for the purpose of confirming the New Covenant revelation. Such gifts were, we believe, then withdrawn in harmony with Old Testament precedent that miraculous powers were given to God's servants for limited periods only (e.g. Moses, Elijah, Elisha). They are not, therefore, practised in the Churches of God. The idea of a '*second blessing*', marked by speaking in tongues, which believers should seek as a sign of baptism in the Holy Spirit, is seen as unscriptural. Tongues were a sign to the unbelieving, not to believers. God's healing today in response to prayer is thankfully recognised, but is regarded as different from miraculous '*gifts of healing*' in New Testament times.

1 Cor. 12:4-11, 28-31; 14:22; Heb 2:3-4.

14 As to prophetic matters, it is believed that, prior to the Great Tribulation, all believers in the Church which is His Body will be caught up to meet the Lord in the air, the dead in Christ being raised, and the living saints changed. All believers will stand before the Judgement Seat of Christ, each one to receive reward according to the deeds done in the body. *Rom. 14:10-12; 2 Cor. 5:10; 1 Thess. 4:15-18.*

15 This is followed in due course by Daniel's seventieth week of seven years in which the Antichrist, the Man of Sin, will wield Satan's power, followed by the return of the Lord Jesus Christ to the earth in judgement,

and then to enter His thousand year reign. *Dan. 9:24-27; Matt. 24:15-31; 2 Thess. 2:3-10; Rev. 20:2-10.*

16 Thereafter the Devil, who had been bound in the abyss for one thousand years, will re-assert his power, but will be overcome and cast into the lake of fire. When this time is completed, the present heaven and earth will pass away and God will bring in a new heaven and a new earth, where righteousness will dwell. *Isa. 66:22; Rev. 20:7-15; 21:1-5.*

They practise:

17 The Breaking of the Bread is held on the first day of the week - the Lord's Day. At the beginning of the service, a brother goes to the table and, first for the bread and then for the wine, gives thanks, breaks or pours, then distributes for all to partake. Only those who have been baptized by immersion as disciples, and have been added to the Church are eligible to partake of the bread and wine. Brethren then lead the Church in worship by offering worship and thanksgiving by the Spirit of God, through the Great High Priest over God's House, and in the heavenly sanctuary. This constitutes the holy priesthood service of the people of God. All are encouraged to say the Amen, but beyond this and the singing, sisters take no audible part in the meeting for the Breaking of the Bread, or on any other occasion when the Assembly meets 'in Church'. On all such occasions sisters have their heads covered. After the worship is over a brother may minister the Word.

Acts 2:41,42; 20:7; 1 Cor. 11:2-18, 20-29; 14:34-38; Phil. 3:3; Heb. 10:19-22.

18 Other activities on the Lord's Day may include meetings for the ministry of the Word, Sunday School and youth work, the preaching of the gospel in the hall, hospitals and old peoples' homes, together with the distribution of gospel leaflets. *Matt. 28:18-20; 1 Thess. 1:8.*

19 In the Churches there is usually at least one mid-week meeting for prayer, and with it ministry of the Word or Bible study. *Acts 2:42; Rom. 12:12; Eph. 4:11-13; 6:18.*

20 By regular arrangements also, ministry conferences, special outreach meetings and gatherings for young people are held. Such meetings are commonly held on a District basis or sometimes on a national or international basis. *Matt. 28:18-20; Phil. 1:27.*

21 Every Church of God is led by two or more overseers and wherever possible, deacons also. Overseers meet regularly for prayer and discussion, and separately with the deacons. *Acts 14:23; Phil. 1:1; Titus 1:5.*

22 The Churches are grouped in recognised areas, corresponding in principle to the groupings of New Testament Churches in Roman provinces. The overseers in each area (usually termed Districts) meet regularly for consultation, on the principle that local overseers deal with matters in their own Church, and overseers collectively at District level with matters affecting the Churches in the District. Any matter beyond the capacity of local overseers, or any failure on their part in judgement, would go to overseers at District level for counsel and help. *2 Cor. 8:1,19; Gal. 1:2; 1 Pet. 1:1; 5:1-4.*

23 Overseers in a country may meet by arrangement. Overseers of all the Churches world-wide meet at regular intervals. By this means, unity of teaching and practice is maintained throughout all the Churches. *Acts 15; 1 Cor. 4:17; 11:16; 2 Cor. 8:19-24; 1 Pet. 5:1-4.*

24 There is no system of clergy and laity. All the brethren are encouraged in the exercise of their gift. The apostle Peter described himself simply as a 'fellow elder'. The Church of God in Philippi comprised only of saints, overseers and deacons. *1 Cor. 14:26-33, 40; Eph. 4:7-13; Phil. 1:1; 1 Pet. 5:1.*

25 There is, however, recognition of the New Testament arrangement for the Churches to give financial support to brethren approved in the ministry of the Word, and who are commended to an itinerant ministry of evangelism and teaching. *Acts 13:1-3; 15:40; 16:3; 3 John 5-8.*

26 The general practice in local meetings, and larger conferences, is for all the ministry of the Word to be by arrangement. *Rom. 12:5-8; 1 Cor. 14:26-33.*

Summary:

27 The Churches thus take their stand in witness to their understanding of the whole counsel of God. As a consequence, while they love all His children, they maintain a position of separation in divine service. For their own people they also teach abstention from entertainment which is detrimental to the spiritual life. In contrast to present world trends, they emphasise high standards of morality. They also disapprove of the use of tobacco and the misuse of alcohol, discourage involvement in politics or military service, and stress generally the need for life and conduct to be worthy of their high calling. *Acts 20:27; 1 Cor. 9:25-27; 2 Cor. 6:14-7:1; Gal. 2:18; 5:14-26; 2 Tim. 2:21-22; 1 John 2:15.*

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