

“Brief History of the Church that is Now Recognized as the Church of God”

By A.J. Tomlinson

About the year 1884, a spirit of dissatisfaction and unrest began to work in the mind of a licensed minister of the Missionary Baptist church by the name of Richard G. Spurling, then living in Monroe County, Tenn. The dissatisfaction arose because of certain traditions and creeds which were burdensome and exceedingly binding on the members.

This humble and sincere servant of God, who was also a faithful servant of the church of which he was a member and licensed minister, began a more careful study of the Bible, and for two years or more spent much time in searching the Scriptures and church history, with a view to a reformation.

After two years or more of careful searching, praying and weeping, and pleading with his church for reform to no avail, he, with others, began to arrange for an independent meeting for a conference and a more careful consideration of religious matters.

The result of the prayers and research on the part of Mr. Spurling and his companions proved three things to their entire satisfaction.

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when the noble and illustrious reformers were throwing off and breaking out from under the galling yoke of Romanism, and launched and inaugurated what is commonly known as Protestantism, they failed to reform from creeds; they adopted the law of faith when they should have adopted the law of love; and third, they failed to reserve a right of the way for the leadership of the Holy Ghost and conscience.

Besides the aforesaid points, they were awakened to the fact that God's Church existed only where His law and government was observed by His children.

After having taken plenty of time for consideration, the time and place for the meetings was arranged and announced. That day is worthy of remembrance. Thursday, August 19, 1886.

The small company of humble, faithful, conscientious pilgrims met at Barney Creek meeting house, Monroe County, Tennessee. After prayer, a strong discourse was delivered by Richard G. Spurling, emphasizing the need of a reformation. The arguments were full of force and proved effective, and were endorsed by the hearers, so that when the time came for action there was free and earnest response.

The proposition and obligation was simple. We give it below: "As many Christians as are here present that are desirous to be free from all men made creeds and traditions, and are willing to take the New Testament, or law of Christ, for your only rule of faith and practice; giving each other equal rights and privilege to read and interpret for yourselves as your conscience may dictate, and are willing to set together as the Church of God to transact business at the same, come forward."

In response to this proposition eight persons, whose names are given below, presented themselves and gave to each other the right hands of fellowship: Richard Spurling, John Plemons, Sr., Polly Plemons, Barbara Spurling, Margaret Lauftus, Melinda Plemons, John Plemons, Jr., Adeline Lauftus.

After having joined themselves together under the above obligation they decided to name the baby organization "Christian Union." They then decided to receive persons into membership who are possessed with a good Christian character, and that ordained and licensed ministers from other churches could retain their same position or office without being reordained.

By virtue of the office he had held as a faithful ordained minister in the Missionary Baptist church for a number of years, Elder Richard Spurling was duly acknowledged and recognized as their minister, to do all the business devolved on him as such in the new order. He then having been placed in authority by the body, took his seat as moderator, and by prayer dedicated the infant church of God, imploring His guidance and blessings for it, and that it might grow and prosper, and accomplish great good.

An invitation was then given for the reception of members, and they received Richard G. Spurling, who was then a licensed minister. The church chose him as their pastor, and had him ordained the next month, September 26, 1886.

Soon after this, Elder Richard Spurling died, at the advanced age of about seventy-four years. Although he was honored with being the first ordained minister, yet he did not live to see the results of his prayers, tears and labors of love in assisting to launch this last great reformation, that is now assuming such vast proportions as it is spreading the world.

To the sleepless nights of prayer and labors of love by this remarkable old saint, and his son, Richard G. Spurling, who is still living, we attribute much of the success and advancement of later years. No doubt they only saw the light as through a glass darkly, but the rays of the early dawn pierced through the darkness until they were made able to at least declare independence and freedom from creeds and sing "Hosanna to the Son of David" for liberty. Great praises be to our God.

The little church grew very slowly. Few cared anything about the infant organization. The pastor, R.G. Spurling, continued his preaching, not only at the church, but wherever he was granted the liberty. IN this way the minds of the people were continually agitated, and gradually prepared for the work of the Spirit that was to follow. For ten years this servant of God prayed, wept and continued his ministry against much opposition and under peculiar difficulties, begin seeing much fruits of his labor.

In the year 1896 three men, who lived in the same county and locality, became much enthused religiously, and were powerfully wrought on by the Spirit of God. These men, whose names were William Martin, Joe m. Tipton and Milton McNabb, went over into Cherokee county, North Carolina, and commenced a meeting at the Shearer schoolhouse. They preached a clean gospel, and urged the people to seek and obtain sanctification subsequent to justification. They prayed, fasted and wept before the Lord until a great revival was the result. People became interested, and were stirred for miles around. Quite a large number professed salvation and sanctification through the blood of Christ. The Baptist and Methodist churches became antagonistic to the wonderful revival that was spreading, and about thirty were excluded from the Baptist church at one time because they professed to live a holy life, which the church denounced as heresy.

After the close of the series of meetings, and the three evangelists were gone, the people commenced a Sunday school, and regular prayer meetings were conducted, usually by William F. Bryant, a leading man of the community. The people earnestly sought God, and the interest increased until unexpectedly, like a cloud from a clear sky, the Holy Ghost began to fall on the honest, humble, sincere seekers after God. While the meetings were in progress one after another fell under the power of God, and soon quite a number were speaking in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance. The influence and excitement then spread like wildfire, and people came for many miles to investigate, hear and see the manifestations of the presence of God.

Men, women and children received the Holy Ghost and spoke in other tongues under the power of the mighty Spirit of God.

The power of healing was soon realized, and a number of miraculous cases of healings were wrought by the power of God. The people knew but little about the Bible, but they prayed, and shouted and exhorted until hundreds of hard sinners were converted. The influence grew and spread until it extended into three or four adjoining counties. Persecutions arose, and four or five houses were burned with these earnest, humble people met for worship.

At one time the storm of persecution broke in with such fury that one hundred and six men, composed of Methodist and Baptist ministers, stewards and deacons, one justice of the peace and one sheriff, banded themselves together to put down the revival, even by violence, if that were the only way it could be accomplished. They deliberately tore down and burned the house, where sinners were getting saved in nearly every service, in open daylight. But the greater the persecution the more the revival spread.

The meetings were moved to the home of W.F. Bryant, and the power and glory increased. It was while they were in progress there that seven men banded themselves together to stop the work, and one day rode to the home of Mr. Bryant and demanded him to stop the meetings, and also forbade him to have prayers with his family; but, like Daniel of old, he purposed in his heart to obey God rather than man, and the meetings were continued, amid threats, showers of stones and rains of lead.

During these years of revivals and persecutions, Mr. Spurling often came in their midst, and in vain tried to show the precious people the need of God's law and government. Everything moved on smoothly among themselves for several months, even years, and they were able to endure all the persecutions heaped upon

them, with grace and love. But in the absence of government and authority, false teachers crept in and led many humble, sincere, unwary souls into error. Factions began to show themselves, and fanaticism took possession of some who were more easily duped by Satan than others.

About that time Mr. Bryant and a few others began to see the mistake in being without government and authority, but as they were unable to accomplish anything on that line the work was allowed to drift. It is estimated that more than one hundred persons really received the baptism with the Holy Ghost and spoke in tongues as the evidence during the revival.

It was not until May 15, 1902, that any plan for government was adopted. On that day a number of humble people met at the home of Mr. Bryant, Cherokee county, N.C., and under the instructions and supervision of Mr. Spurling, an organization was effected. While this was a continuation of the same organization that was started sixteen years before, yet it was not given the same name, as it was in a different locality. It was called "The Holiness Church at Camp Creek," in Cherokee county, N.C. One of the officers, W.F. Bryant, was set forth by the church and ordained, which made the church permanent.

R.G. Spurling was chosen pastor, and they continued their meetings; yet the work was rather slow to develop as so many had been led into error by the false teaching referred to above, but a sufficient number remained true to keep the work alive. For a year it was a real struggle to hold the organization against much unbelief and criticism, and there were no additions.

In was in June, 1903, that the work revived and took upon it a new impetus. At a meeting held June 13, of the above named year, we made a more careful study of the New Testament order, and five more accepted the obligation and joined with the faithful little flock to push the work along. Another minister and two deacons were ordained by the church in proper order. The new minister was chosen for pastor, and that year there were fourteen more accessions, and the work went on smoothly and prospered amid some light persecutions. One among the number added that year was MS. Lemons.

The next year one organization was effected in Georgia and two more in Tennessee. Then the workers had increased, and evangelism was encouraged, so the work grew and prospered under the blessings and approval of God.

Near the close of 1905 the work had so prospered that there began to be a demand for a general gathering together of members from all the churches to consider questions of importance and to search the Bible for additional light and knowledge. Accordingly arrangements were made and the meeting called.

The first Assembly of the churches of God was held January 26 and 27, 1906, at the home of J.D. Murphy, Cherokee county, N.C., about one-half mile from the school house where the great revival had broken out ten years before. Twenty-one members were in attendance as representatives from the different churches. Many important questions were discussed, and much added light obtained by those present.

The Second Annual Assembly was held at Union Grove, a meeting house in the country, ten miles from Cleveland, Tenn. Up to this time there had been but little said about the name of the church except "The Church of God" had gradually come into use in conversation and preaching. But by this time we were getting thoroughly awakened on Scriptural themes and Apostolic teachings and practices regarding the church. Subjects and questions were discussed freely, with a view to coming fully to the Bible standard and plan for the Bible church.

At a session held at 8:30 on Friday morning, January 11, 1907, the name "Church of God" was adopted, with the addition of the name of the place or locality where it existed. Examples: "The Church of God" at Cleveland, Tenn.; "The Church of God" at London, Ky., etc. This, however, was not meant to debar the use of the other Scriptural names, such as: "The Church," "Churches in Christ," "Church...in God our Father

The Third Annual Assembly was held January 8-12, 1908, at Cleveland, Tenn., and they have been held at the same place each successive year since. Every year has been more and more prosperous. The number of churches and membership have increased until at the Eighth Annual Assembly, held January 7-12, 1913, there was reported 104 churches in TEN different States, and the Bahama Islands, with a total membership of 3,056. The report also shows forty-six Bishops, one hundred and twelve Deacons and sixty-one Evangelists.

The obligation has gradually assumed a broader and more elaborate form, because of a demand for it, and the need for a fuller explanation, so as to protect the church against some who might not be sincere and thoroughly conscientious. Following is nearly the common form of explanation and obligation:

As Jesus Christ is the sole founder and originator of His Church, and still retains the position as head and only lawgiver, all who connect themselves with His Church will be expected to obey His laws and government, walking in the light as He is in the light, thus giving fellowship to each other and the assurance of the blood cleansing from all sin. (I John 1:7.)

The applicants for membership are expected to accept the teaching of repentance, water baptism (by immersion), sanctification subsequent to conversion, the baptism with the Holy Ghost on the sanctified life evidenced by the speaking in tongues as the Spirit gives utterance, the Lord's Supper, feet washing, eternal punishment for the wicked and eternal life for the righteous, divine healing, tithing and offerings, and the second pre-millennial coming of the Lord. Applicants must sever their connection with churches and lodges, if not already free from them.

Men having two or more wives, divorced or undivorced and women having two or more husbands, divorced or undivorced, should not publicly present themselves for membership, but if they wish to join the church they should apply to the pastor or church privately, and be examined as to reasons for being so situated. Those using tobacco in any form should not present themselves for membership.

The obligation is simple, and just what every true child of God desires to practice.

Will you sincerely promise before God and these witnesses that you will take the Bible as your guide, the New Testament as your rule of faith and practice, government and discipline, and walk in the light to the best of your knowledge and ability?

Having accepted the above explanation and obligation the applicants are usually asked to kneel in holy reverence before God, while the minister engages in prayer and asks God's guidance and blessings upon the new members, and to make them useful, and keep them true and faithful until Jesus comes or calls.

When the prayer is ended a song is usually sung by the congregation, and all the members give them a glad welcome by extending to them the right hands of fellowship.

The Church recognizes three orders of ministers at present, but two more orders were mentioned in the Seventh Annual Assembly. The three now recognized are first, Bishops, second, Deacons, and third, Evangelists.

Applicants for the ministry are carefully and prayerfully examined as to their qualifications. It is expected that every examination conform strictly to the New Testament, and that all applicants measure to the requirements given therein before ordination. Paul's instructions to Timothy and Titus are strictly observed. It is against the rules of the Church to ordain or license any one who is a member of any lodge or society outside of the Church of God. The use of tobacco is forbidden, and under no circumstances can one be placed in the ministry who is addicted to its use.

There is also a strictness on the part of the Church about men or women having two or more living husbands, divorced or undivorced. Under no circumstances is it allowable to place one in the ministry who has more than one living wife, divorced or undivorced, if he pretends to live with either one; and no one can be ordained Bishop or Deacon who has a wife and does not live with her for any cause.

"Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it' that he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word, that he might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish." (Eph. 5:25-27)

"Arise, shine; for thy light is come, and the glory of the Lord is risen upon thee. For, behold the darkness shall cover the earth, and gross darkness the people; but the Lord shall arise upon thee, and his glory shall be seen upon thee. And the Gentiles shall come to thy light and kings to the brightness of thy rising. Lift up thine eyes round about, and see: all they gather themselves together, they come to thee" (Isa. 60:1-4.)

There fore the redeemed of the Lord shall return, and come with singing unto Zion; and everlasting joy shall be upon their head; they shall obtain gladness and joy; and sorrow and mourning shall flee away." (Isa. 51:11.)

“Thy watchmen shall lift up the voice with the voice together shall they sing; for they shall see eye to eye, when the Lord shall bring again Zion.” (Isa. 52:8.)

“Enlarge the place of they tent, and let them stretch forth the curtains of they habitations; spare not, lengthen thy cords, and strengthen thy stakes; for thou shalt break forth on the right hand and on the left; and thy seed shall inherit the Gentiles, and make the desolate cities to be inhabited.” (Isa. 54:2,3.)

“In righteousness shalt thou be established: . . . whosoever shall gather together against thee shall fall for thy sake. . . . No weapon that is formed against thee shall prosper, and every tongue that shall rise against thee in judgment thou shalt condemn. This is the heritage of the servants of the Lord, and their righteousness is of me, saith the Lord.” (Isa. 54:14-17.)

From: A. J. Tomlinson, *The Last Great Conflict* (Cleveland, Tenn.: Press of Walter E. Rodgers, 1913), 184-98.