

How did our understanding of some areas of Christian living change over time? Our church historian explains.

by Robert Coulter

The Church of Christ, later known as the Church of God (Seventh Day), of the 1860s did not have a written position on Christian lifestyles. Apparently she left standards of morality and Christian living up to the Christian community as a whole. The church's theological concerns were weekly Sabbath observance, the second coming of Jesus, mortality and unconscious state of the dead, resurrection of the righteous to everlasting life at Jesus' return, and His millennial kingdom, followed by the final judgment and annihilation of the wicked and the establishment of the eternal kingdom of God.

Early days

The use of tobacco and alcoholic beverages was acceptable to the Church of Christ. Her founder, Gilbert Cranmer, chewed tobacco, but was loved and accepted by her membership as the church's founder and evangelist.

However, a sizable group of churches in New England, known as the Church of the First Born, had teachings similar to those of the Church of Christ. The group proposed that the two churches explore the possibility of uniting, but when it learned that Cranmer used tobacco, it cancelled the talks. One of the group's lead-



ing ministers wrote in a letter, published in *The Hope of Israel* (December 23, 1864), "as far as the use of tobacco is concerned, I am happy to say the Church of the First Born . . . regards it as a dirty, loathsome, expensive, unhealthy practice, from which every disciple of Christ should abstain."

The Church of God in Wisconsin also interacted with the Church of Christ by sending representatives to attend her quarterly, churchwide meetings throughout the 1860s, and frequent exchanges of ministers occurred between the Church of God and the churches in Michigan, Iowa, and Missouri. But the leadership of the Church of God never proposed to affiliate with the Church of Christ, nor any of her sister churches, possibly because she accepted Cranmer's use of tobacco.

Tobacco, alcohol, dress

Andrew N. Dugger became president of the General Conference in 1921 and was the first to challenge the Church to condemn the use of tobacco and alcoholic beverages. His reforms met with resistance in some quarters of the Church. This prompted him to urge the General Conference-in-session to adopt resolutions requiring the membership to refrain from using tobacco and alcohol.

The conference's delegates were asked to appoint a committee to study the question of members using tobacco and alcoholic drinks and report their findings to the conference before it adjourned. The committee made its study and reported that members of the Church of God should not use tobacco in any form. But it failed to address the use of alcoholic beverages out of



respect for some newly affiliated members from North and South Dakota who consumed wine from various fruit juices and a low-alcoholic beer for table and recreational use.

In 1933 the competing conference that organized at Salem, West Virginia, adopted a more ascetic “holiness” lifestyle for its membership. Women of the church were discouraged from cutting their hair and encouraged to wear dresses with long sleeves and hems down to their ankles. Wedding rings and other jewelry were also discouraged. Tobacco and alcohol were forbidden, along with tea and coffee, as habit-forming beverages.

Salem’s more ascetic lifestyle eventually faded by the 1950s when members returned to drinking coffee and tea, and the ladies cut their hair and wore stylish dresses.

Marriage and divorce

The doctrinal statements of the Stanberry and Salem conferences of the Church of God didn’t address marriage and divorce prior to 1949. But their revised doctrinal statement on marriage of 1949 said, “We believe that any marriage contract entered into between husband and wife at a time prior to the conversion of either party to the marriage, should be recognized as acceptable to the Church if recognized by civil law. . . .”

In spite of that statement, some ministers advised married couples that if one of the partners had been divorced prior to their marriage, they should separate because the couple was living in adultery. In 1974 a study by the Church of God’s Ministerial Council on marriage and divorce removed the misconception about divorce that had

misguided the Church on the subject:

1. The Church recognizes that anyone who obtains a divorce for reasons of illicit sex, such as adultery, fornication, incest, homosexuality, etc., on the part of his/her marriage partner may be the innocent party to the divorce. The marriage is dissolved. The innocent party may remarry.

2. A divorce involving any member of the Church of God (Seventh Day) may be cause to relieve him/her of all church responsibilities and to disfellowship him/her.

3. The Church appreciates the greatness of God’s grace to forgive sins, and she stands willing to receive into her membership those who have been so blessed. The Church agrees to relegate forgiven sins, including those involving divorce and remarriage, to the past. She accepts the true convert as a new creature in Christ and is willing to accord full membership to those who apply. . . .

The Church’s present positions on marriage, divorce, and various areas of Christian living are in our Statement of Faith at cog7.org/about-us/, and are elaborated in *This We Believe: The Teachings of the Church of God (Seventh Day)*. **BA**

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