The Slacum Controversy and the Personality of Reform

by

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THE SLACUM CONTROVERSY AND THE PERSONALITY OF REFORM

Personality is understood to be "the complex of characteristics that distinguishes an individual, nation, or group,"[1] and further as "deeply ingrained and relatively enduring patterns of thought, feeling, and behavior."[2] As with all institutions, the Church of God Reformation Movement has its own complexion, disposition, or "personality," impacting the thought and actions of its members. The influence of the movement's early "personality of reform" can be seen affecting Earl Slacum and others involved in what came to be known as the "Slacum controversy" of the late 1940's and early 1950's. The issues raised in the controversy were characteristically familiar to the church, and responses to the disagreement displayed the temperament of the institution; having a lasting impact on the movement as a whole, well beyond the borders of its inception in the state of Indiana.

In 1944, Earl Slacum, theologically conservative and known as a "straight line" preacher, pastored a newly planted church, in Muncie Indiana.[3] During this period of his pastorate, Slacum became distressed over his perception of a decline in "doctrinal

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[1] *Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary*, "Personality," http://www.m-w.com/ (accessed April 18, 2004).

[2] *MSN Encarta Online Encyclopedia*, "Personality," http://encarta.msn.com/ (accessed April 18, 2004).

[3] Merle D. Strege, *I Saw the Church; the life of the Church of God told theologically* (Anderson, Indiana: Warner Press, 2002), 273.

preaching" within the movement.[4] Slacum used the results of a graduate thesis by Robert

Reardon, indicating sanctification was a lesser concern of Church of God pastors, as

evidence of this doctrinal decline,[5] Three particular problems worried Slacum: the

movement emphasizing contemporary methods and solutions at the neglect of its

theological heritage, the dangerous influence of theology external to the movement, and

new ideas introduced by people within the Church of God.[6] His concern with these

problems was founded on Slacum's conclusion that the Church of God Movement "had

all the truth that has been discovered from the pages of God's word." [7] Apprehensions

about doctrinal integrity and preservation of the truth that were brewing inside Earl

Slacum's mind came to a full boil with the introduction of the "Dawson Plan" in the

summer of 1944.

The "Dawson Plan" referred to an organizational model whereby state ministries

would be coordinated under the administration of a "State Evangelist."[8] I. K. Dawson,

Secretary of Evangelism for the Board of Church Extension and Home Missions, outlined

the plan in a 32 page booklet entitled *Working Together in an Enlarged Program of State*

Evangelism.[9] To Slacum, this"new" plan undermined and subordinated the concept of

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[4] Ibid.

[5] John W. V. Smith, *The Quest for Holiness and Unity* (Anderson, Indiana: Warner Press, 1980), 329-330.

[6] Strege, 273-274

[7] Emphasis added, see Strege, 277

[8] Smith, 329

[9] Smith, 328-329

charismatic government, a plank in the Church of God theological platform. At the

Indiana Ministers Meeting in September of 1944, Earl Slacum delivered a sermon

entitled "Watchmen on the Wall" where he lambasted the "Dawson Plan," and then

outlined the major issues at the center of the struggle that would come to be known as the

"Slacum controversy."[10]

The "Dawson Plan" highlighted concerns about the escalation of organization

within the movement's national agency structure, and the subsequent distressing affect on

charismatic government. From this springboard, Slacum leapt into his perception of other

detours from earlier teachings of the Church of God, most notably Christian unity. Also

at issue was the "worldliness" perceived as evident in the lives of the Anderson agency

leaders.[11] Slacum suspected Anderson leaders of "letting down the standard" on personal

holiness, by involving themselves in "worldly amusements" and resorting to doctors

rather than divine healing.[12] The last major issue was the concentration of authority

within the expanding agencies and the observation by Slacum and many others of a

"power bloc" in Anderson.[13] Interlocking directorates emerged as leaders of the agencies

appointed each other to one another's boards, resulting in a growing sense of frustration

and powerlessness among grassroots ministers.[14] These issues of organization, holiness,

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[10] Smith, 328

[11] Barry L. Callen, comp., The Following the Light; the Teachings, Testimonies, Trials and Triumphs of the Church of God Movement, Anderson (Anderson, Indiana: Warner Press, 2000), 378.

[12] Smith, 326

[13] Smith, 327

[14] Callen , 378

and centralized power were at the center of the Slacum controversy, but not new to the Church of God Reformation Movement, they were a revisitation of past tribulations.

When Earl Slacum preached his sermon to the Indiana general ministerial assembly, he made a veiled reference to a"liberalized" statement on Christian unity made to the same ministers meeting 50 years before. [15] Slacum was referring to Russell R. Byrum's sermon on Christian unity which he read to the Indiana ministers in 1929, consequently igniting a controversy regarding Anderson College and challenges to the apocalyptic identity of the movement.[16] Byrum's paper was a direct affront to come-outism, an outmoded belief he argued, grounded in the apocalyptic identity F.G. Smith championed.[17] These "new ideas" on Christian unity closely followed the introduction of General Ministerial Assembly and the birth of Anderson College. In the late 1920's, F.G. Smith and others were concerned the movement had digressed from earlier doctrinal teachings of unity and charismatic organization. Slacum's rebuke of "worldliness" was a reverberation of C. E. Orr and the necktie controversy around the turn of the century. During earlier periods, the movement had struggled with similar renditions of problems echoed in the Slacum controversy, resulting in a lasting impact on the direction of the movement. As with earlier controversies, Slacum's sermon, delivered in the State of Indiana, began a debate that would impact the Church of God on a national level.

The impact of the Slacum controversy on the Church of God is best assessed by reviewing the response the movement made to the debate it initiated. Following his

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[15] Smith, 328

[16] Ibid.

[17] Strege, 159

sermon, Earl Slacum "received considerable confirmation that he sounded a needed warning to the church", subsequently, publishing his own paper named *The Watchmen on the Walls*, and taking his campaign to the national level.[18] The circulation of this paper, with its combination of relevant material and personal attacks, fueled existing dissatisfaction within the movement, eroding confidence in its national agencies.[19] Probably in light of the personal attacks, agency leaders responded to Slacum through their organizations rather than personally. The Indiana assembly called for Slacum to desist his attacks; the Gospel Trumpet Company reenlisted F. G. Smith as figurehead spokesman to restore confidence in their organization; and most notably, the General Ministerial Assembly responded with a resolution re-avowing historic doctrines and expressing confidence in national agencies.[20] In addition, the General Ministerial Assembly created two committees, one to deal specifically with the charges brought by Slacum, and another to focus attention on concerns by grassroots ministers on the interlocking directorates evident in the Anderson agencies. The end results of these committees was manifold, the the Assembly's rebuke of Earl Slacum resulted in him leaving the movement to pursue his own "reformation;" the outcome of the second committee was a restructuring of the Executive Council reducing the power of potential "Anderson" insiders.[21]

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[18] Smith, 330

[19] Strege, 282

[20] Strege, 283

[21] Strege, 285

The influence of the Slacum controversy was not limited to organizational elements of the Church of God Reformation Movement. C. E. Brown, then editor of *The Gospel Trumpet,* addressed the broader theological questions of holiness and charismatic organization contained in the controversy. In a series of lectures which were later published,[22] Brown reshaped the interpretation of holy living, questioning the purpose of holiness. For Brown, the purpose of a holy life was not ascetic behavior, equating to "badges of holiness" but rather practices enabling the Christian to greater service.[23] On charismatic organization, Brown interpreted the current problems as a tension between his concepts of "spiritual democracy" and "the leader principle".[24] In dealing with this tension, he portrayed early movement leadership as being capable of change, as such so should current leadership, adopting more and more democratization in the movement. Brown's theological replies, and the institutional responses to Earl Slacum's offensive, demonstrate the impact this controversy had on the movement. The responses, theological motifs, and practices evident on both sides of this disagreement demonstrate the characteristic influence of "the personality of reform" within the Church of God Reformation Movement.

The Church of God Reformation Movement was established in protest. As John W. V. Smith notes, "No reform movement, religious or otherwise, is born fully grown. Of necessity it starts very simply as one or more persons identify some strongly felt

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[22] Published as *When Souls Awaken: An Interpretation of Radical Christianity.*

[23] Strege, 287

[24] Strege, 288

dissatisfactions and begin to share these with others either verbally or in print."[25] Smith

continues reflecting on the inception of reform, stating "people relate to each other

because they realize they are all disturbed about the same thing or things" finding

themselves "in a fellowship of protest".[26] The disposition towards dissatisfaction is a

characteristic of the "personality of reform" evident in the early Church of God

Movement. Linked with the capability to see the need for change (dissatisfaction) is the

character to effect change (reform), another characteristic of the movement's "personality

of reform." The aptitude to perceive the need for change and to act on that need has been

manifest to the "personality of reform" palpable in the early Church Of God and those

joined in leadership of that movement.

Earl Slacum's association with the Church of God imprinted the "personality of

reform" on him. Aligned with the theologically conservative end of the church, Slacum

embraced most of the foundational precepts of the movement. With the apocalyptic

identity of the church on shaky ground, Slacum's eye for reform focused on the

movement itself. As with D.S. Warner, Earl Slacum intended his actions to affect reform

of a "theologically objectionable organization constructed by others."[27] Slacum regarded

the direction of the movement as "slipping from the vision."[28] Perceiving a doctrinal

decline as a need for change, he acted on that need for change. This evidence of a strong

"personality of reform" coupled with his perspective on having "the *truth,* all of it that

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[25] Smith, 81

[26] Ibid.

[27] Strege, 280

[28] Strege, 277

has been discovered from the pages of God's word,"[29] yields an opinion the controversy with Slacum was probably unavoidable. Earl Slacum was a reformer at heart, and he sincerely believed serious theological issues were at stake. [30] Certainly efforts at avoiding the controversy were exacerbated by decisions to deal with Slacum through official channels only. It was the agencies and organizations that were an irritant to Slacum, personal contact from leadership in Anderson could have possibly defused the conflict. The "personality of reform" was a key influence on Earl Slacum, but it would also hold sway on how the movement responded to the issues Earl Slacum raised.

While the aspect of dissatisfaction manifested itself most in the Earl Slacum "personality of reform," the other aspect of this personality, change, is evident in the movement's response to the Slacum controversy. Changes in organizational structure were motivated by the perceived need for improvement. Dissatisfaction among grassroots ministers, expressed as powerlessness, was understood as an area which needed to be a "reformed." Committees[31] were formed to respond to this dissatisfaction and actions for change were taken that were characteristic of a "personality of reform." The organizational changes made in response to the Slacum controversy were positive steps preparing the movement for the growth and prosperity which would result from the rising religious culture already occurring in the country. The "personality of reform" provided

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[29] Ibid.

[30] As evidence of Slacum's more pure intentions regarding reform, when he realized that that the "new reformation" he began (after leaving the Church Of God) had also become highly organized he brought an end to it by resigning from its boards and organizations and returning to the Church of God fold.

[31] The committee names themselves indicate desire for change ; "The Committee on Revision and Planning" And "The Committee on Research and Improvement"

the Church of God Movement with disposition towards dissatisfaction that would encourage continual efforts at improvement in ministry and organization of the work of the church. This dissatisfaction with the status quo provided the impetus to effect changes in organization structure that decentralized portions of power and influence in Anderson. Decentralization of power would provide better avenues of communication and coordination with local pastors who were about to experience growth and prosperity typical of the post World War II religious expansion. As in the past, the reformation heritage of the the Church of God Movement had served it well, seeing the need for change (dissatisfaction) and having the character to effect change (reform), are distinguishing characteristics of the Church of God and it's "personality of reform."

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