

Winter 2024

ENGAGE

A Journal for Church of God Ministries

IN THIS ISSUE:

- Practicing Christians Give More to Charity
- General Assembly Registration, Housing Now Open
- Thousands of Congregations Have Left the UMC
- Reaching Into Our Neighborhoods, Out to the Nations





ENGAGE

A Journal for Church of God Ministries

Engage Journal is published in the interest of providing contemporary aids and resources to pastors and pastoral staffs.

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From the Editor | Cameron Fisher

An Assembly Year Always Heightens Awareness

Once the the calendar rolls over to the even numbered year, the preparation and anticipation for the upcoming General Assembly ramps up as we are now in, an “Assembly Year.”

While the Assembly is still more than six months away at July 8-12, 2024, it seems as if it is just a few weeks down the road. By the time this issue of *Engage* goes live, the website ga24.org will be up and accepting delegate registrations and hotel reservations. Be sure to check it out.

While registrations and hotels are a priority, the buzz about a potential agenda and the leaders God will anoint to lead the Church of God are on the minds of everyone who love this great church. Three of our current executive committee members will have reached their tenure limitations, so naturally there will be change at the top leadership level.

Like every General Assembly the agenda will contain items of vital consequence. While not yet finalized, the General Council Agenda Committee (GCAC) is meeting regularly to compile a worthwhile group of items for consideration and deliberation.



*Site of the Church of God
79th International General Assembly—
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Indianapolis, Indiana*

Of course, the most important thing anyone can do concerning the Assembly is to bathe it in prayer. Folks can speculate all they want about who would be the best leaders or which agenda items should be carried, but only God above knows the final outcomes. Everyone is encouraged to adopt a spirit of concerted prayer to assure the will of the Lord is realized to guide the Church of God toward its most critical assignment: FINISHING the Great Commission. ■



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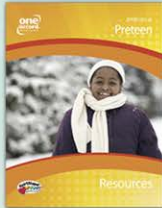
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ABS Report: Practicing Christians Give More to Charity

By Ryan Foley, *The Christian Post*

Relased on November 15, 2023, chapter eight of the ABS' report, *State of the Bible USA 2023*, titled, "Generosity," examines charitable giving patterns based on people's religiosity and level of Scripture engagement.

Overall, 68% of American households donated to charity in 2022. This represents an increase from 2021 when only 62% gave their money to charitable causes. While charitable giving rose from 2021 to 2022, it still remains behind the 69% measured in 2019.

The latest data from ABS shows that a much higher percentage of "churched" people donated to charity last year than their "unchurched" counterparts.

The research defines a churched person as someone who has attended at least one church service other than a funeral or a wedding in the past six months, while an unchurched person is someone who has not.

Ninety-one percent of respondents living in a churched household gave to charity in 2022, while 52% of the unchurched made charitable donations last year.

On average, the churched also gave a higher amount of money to charity than the unchurched. The average amount donated by a churched household was



\$4,749, while unchurched households gave an average of \$3,338 to charity.

Additionally, the research revealed that those who attend online church services are more likely to donate to charity than those who go to in-person church services. Ninety-five percent of online churchgoers and 87% of in-person church attendees gave to charity. Those who go to online services gave an average of \$5,223 to charity. The average amount donated to charity by respondents who attend in-person church services was measured at \$3,330.

When breaking down respondents into practicing Christians and non-practicing Christians, those who fell into the category of practicing Christians gave more to charity than their non-practicing counterparts. Practicing Christians were defined as those who "identify as Christian" and "attend church at least once a month," in addition to viewing their faith as "very important in their lives."



Respondents who neither go to church monthly nor see their faith as very important are categorized as “non-practicing Christians.” Those who did not identify as Christians were labeled “non-Christians.”

Ninety-five percent of practicing Christians donated to charity, followed by 68% of non-practicing Christians and 51% of non-Christians. The average amount of money donated by practicing Christians amounted to \$5,350. That figure dropped to \$3,806 among non-practicing Christians and \$3,163 among non-Christians.

The research also classified respondents based on their level of Scripture engagement or the extent to which the Bible impacts their lives. The term “Scripture engaged” refers to those who score 100 or higher on the “Scripture engagement scale.” The term “movable middle” encompasses those who score between 70 and 99 on the Scripture engagement scale, while the “Bible disengaged” consists of those who score less than 70.

The Scripture engaged had the highest frequency of charitable giving (92%), followed by the movable middle (76%) and the Bible disengaged (54%). The Scripture engaged gave an average of \$6,230 to charity, more than double the \$2,882 donated on average by the Bible disengaged. Those in the movable middle gave an average of \$4,805 to charity.

The data contained in the State of the Bible USA 2023 report is based on 2,761 responses collected between January 5

and January 30. The survey had a margin of error of +/-2.59 percentage points at a 95% confidence level.

In a statement reacting to the findings, ABS Chief Ministry Officer John Farquhar Plake remarked that it will not “come as a surprise that people who are invested in their Christian faith give back.”

“Overall, Americans are generous,” he added. “More than two-thirds of us supported charities in some capacity in 2022! The question for ministry and NGO leaders is how to best channel that generosity for positive impact for the communities that need it most.” ■

(Editor's Note: In 2011, American Bible Society launched a landmark annual study of the State of the Bible in America. This year's report marks thirteen years of listening and learning how consistent interaction with the Bible shapes people's choices and transforms their relationships. In the 2023 report, the State of the Bible research team tracked America's relationship with the Bible, faith, and the Church, including when people engage deeply with the Bible, their lives are better, their relationships are better, and they flourish; Scripture engagement among American adults fell by 4 percent from 49 million to only 47 million; The Movable Middle expanded again, growing over 15 percent from 65 million to nearly 76 million; and a remarkable number of Americans change their faith affiliation over their lifetimes. The ABS profiles those changes and highlights some surprising trends. To read the American Bible Society's State of the Bible USA 2023 report, click [here: https://1s712.americanbible.org/state-of-the-bible/stateofthebible/State_of_the_bible-2023.pdf](https://1s712.americanbible.org/state-of-the-bible/stateofthebible/State_of_the_bible-2023.pdf)).

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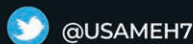
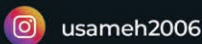
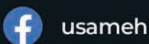


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General Assembly Registration, Housing Now Open

By Cameron Fisher



The calendar has flipped to 2024, which means preparation for the 78th Church of God International General Assembly (GA24) is now fully underway. The Assembly is set for July 8–12, 2024, in Indianapolis, Indiana.

Members of the General Assembly Cabinet, as well as the International Executive Committee, have met on several occasions, including a site visit to Indianapolis in October. Spaces at the Indianapolis Convention Center (ICC) have been designated for the multitude of activities set to take place, such as worship, Ordained Bishops' Council, Children's Church, Junior Talent, the L.E.A.D. Conference, exhibits, dining, and more. Contracts with surrounding hotels, several of

which have connecting skywalks to the ICC, have been secured and await the reservation requests of thousands of delegates from around the globe.

An agenda of items for the General Council is being formulated and will be distributed electronically to ordained bishops 90 days prior to the Assembly. The official agenda, which will be undertaken by the General Council starting Tuesday, July 9, 2024, at 8:30 am, will begin with nominations for the International Executive Committee.

The first orders of business for prospective delegates are registration for the event, followed by hotel accommodations. Registration and display of credentials is required for admission to General Assembly activities, including business sessions where important matters of the Church are set to take place. More than a dozen hotels have partnered with the Church of God to offer special rates for delegates attending GA24.

Delegate registration and access to the hotel offerings is now a live link at the dedicated General Assembly website, ga24.org. The site will continually be updated with information and updates as they become available. ■



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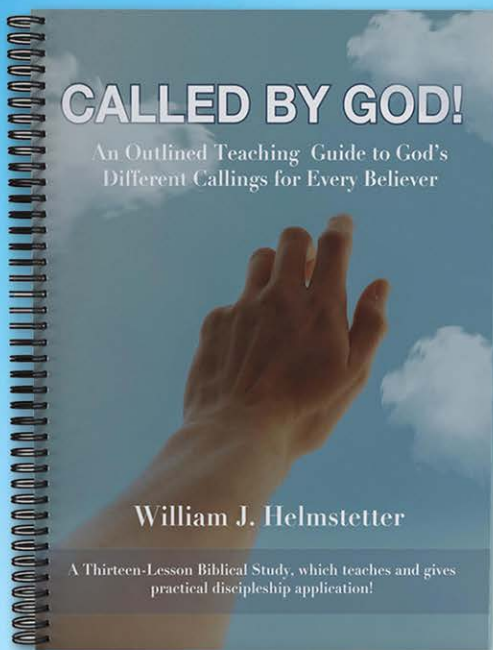
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More Than 7,000 Congregations Have Exited UMC Due to Their LGBTQ Stance

By Michael Gryboski, Mainline Church Editor



The number of congregations that have left the United Methodist Church amid the schism over the denomination's stance on homosexuality has passed the 7,000 mark.

Over the weekend, the number of churches that have disaffiliated from the UMC since 2019 reached 7,286, according to UM News, with more than 5,200 leaving this year alone.

This total includes 366 churches leaving the Kentucky Conference, 349 churches leaving the North Alabama

Conference, 334 churches leaving the North Georgia Conference, 326 churches leaving the North Carolina Conference, and 317 churches leaving the Indiana Annual Conference.

Of the 334 congregations that have disaffiliated from the North Georgia Conference since 2019, 261 were given approval to disaffiliate over the weekend at a special session held by the regional body.

According to a statement from the conference, there are still about



440 congregations affiliated with the regional body. These include four congregations whose disaffiliation votes were not approved: The Fountain United Methodist Church at Sugarloaf in Duluth, McEachern Memorial United Methodist Church in Powder Springs, Trinity United Methodist Church of Rome, and Griffin First United Methodist Church.

Over the past few decades, the UMC has been embroiled in a divisive debate over whether the country's second-largest Protestant denomination should amend language from its *Book of Discipline* that prohibits the blessing of same-sex unions and the ordination of clergy in same-sex romantic relationships.

Although efforts to change the *Book of Discipline* have failed, liberal leaders within the denomination have often refused to follow or enforce the rules, drawing the ire of many theological conservatives.

At a special session of the General Conference held in 2019, delegates voted to add paragraph 2553 to the *UMC Book of Discipline*, a measure to allow churches to disaffiliate from the denomination. The measure is set to expire at the end of the year (2023).

While thousands of congregations across the United States have disaffiliated from the UMC under the parameters of paragraph 2553, some

congregations have either had their disaffiliation votes rejected by their regional conferences or have faced other obstacles in their bid to leave.

Some of those churches have filed legal action against their respective conferences, accusing them of either not properly following the disaffiliation process or arguing that the process is unfair.

Earlier this month, a court in Montgomery, Alabama, ruled against 42 congregations trying to leave the Alabama-West Florida Conference, concluding that, as a secular court, it did not have the authority to intervene in the churches' complaint.

"The Court is without jurisdiction to rule on such issues because the relief sought by Plaintiffs would require the Court to interpret a provision of the *Book of Discipline* intertwined with church doctrine," ruled the Montgomery County Circuit Court.

Thousands of congregations that have disaffiliated from the UMC have joined the Global Methodist Church, a theologically conservative denomination launched as an alternative to UMC last year. ■

(Editor's Note: This article appeared in *The Christian Post* on November 21, 2023.)



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Reaching Into Our Neighborhood, Reaching Out to the Nations

By Randy Eaton



Cross Community Church (CCC) is a Church of God congregation in Palm Beach Gardens, Florida. The church's mission is to help people grow up in their faith, grow together in community, and grow out through mission. We want to see people believe in Christ, belong to a church, and become disciples of Christ. Perhaps you are thinking: If I lived in Palm Beach

Gardens, I would establish a mission for surfers, sailors, and golfers with high handicaps. We may already have, but you must come and take me to lunch for that information! But in the meantime, we can consider four aspects of the mission that CCC considers essential. This helps us as we try to reach into our neighborhood and the nations.



Calling

CCC faces many challenges, from financial obstacles and cultural trends to the continual need for pastoral leadership and church unity. But like your church, we know we are called to a mission. The term *mission* can become nuanced. But properly understood, the term is associated with the mission of God, or *Misseo Dei*. God was the first missionary. He sent His Son into the world. Now, He sends us, and we share the same message that “God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself” (2 Corinthians 5:19 NKJV). This sense of calling motivates CCC with a mission. But we must be honest. This sense of calling is only sometimes as conspicuous in our lives as it should be.

We ask ourselves what factors influence churches to become motivated by the mission of God. There are many: Some are anecdotal, while others are quantifiable. For CCC, the two factors that instill a sense of mission are Bible study and prayer. We realize various models and systems exist, and CCC does not claim to have a corner on the market. But we know this: Biblical mission is best understood as we study the Bible and seek the Lord’s will. Our small groups and our prayer services are fundamental to our mission.

Collaboration

Church leaders desire to lead people on a mission, serve the community, and please God. Leaders want to see the church make a difference. In the words

of G.K. Chesterton, “We do not want a church that will move with the world; we want a church that will move the world.” But how can we do this? CCC has learned that one way is collaboration. CCC partners with multiple local and global partners.

The following are examples of our local/international partnerships and collaborative attempts to reach our neighborhood and the world. In the regional alliances, CCC provides financial support, participates in community events, hosts community leadership at our annual mission conference, and constantly communicates with these leaders on how we can better serve them. CCC’s global partnerships are a bit more complicated due to location. But CCC supports and hosts these ministry leaders at our annual mission conference. CCC’s small groups also share the responsibility of raising money for missionaries on the field.

Local Outreach

- **First Care.** First Care seeks to help stop abortion in Palm Beach County and help women choose life for their unborn child.
- **Youth For Christ (YFC).** For more than 30 years, Youth For Christ has been pursuing the students of Palm Beach County to build healthy relationships and introduce them to the person and work of Jesus Christ.



- **Adopt A School.** Dr. Tony Evans suggests that every church adopt a school in their community. CCC adopted Dwight D. Eisenhower's K-8 school six years ago.
- **Scarlet Hope.** Scarlet Hope is a ministry designed to rescue women from sex traffic king.
- **Streets of the Lost and Found.** Members of CCC started this ministry and focus on reaching people experiencing homelessness.

Global Outreach

- **Kelly Blanchard.** Kelly is a member of CCC and former CCC Staff. She serves full-time as the on-site supervisor at Casa Shalom Orphanage in San Lucas, Sacatepéquez.
- **Alex Abiola.** Alex Abiola is a member of CCC. He serves as the overseer to Nigeria and Superintendent to Anglophone West Africa.
- **Max and Debbie Thompson.** They direct the Phebe Gray Orphanage in Liberia, Africa.
- **Chuck and Lori Gipson.** Chuck and Lori are missionaries with Campus Crusade for Christ.
- **Five (5) Nigerian pastors** under the leadership of Alex Abiola.

Communication

I read a time management article titled, "The Unimportance of Practically Everything." John Maxwell said, "You

cannot overestimate the unimportance of practically everything." At CCC, we take this to heart. We don't get it all right and have work to do with leadership development, but we try to focus on our mission and communicate what we want to do. We recognize that our partnerships and leadership relationships must be constantly shared with our church. Here are the steps we take weekly, monthly, and yearly.

- **Weekly,** we share in our Sunday church announcements, Enews, and small group settings about our local and global partnerships. We will focus weekly on specific regional and international partners to keep the information manageable. If one of our mission partners is in town, they will speak in the service and greet small groups. In addition, each small group takes up a weekly offering, so the mission partners and goals are kept at the center of our discipleship.
- **We share mission-related videos** from our partners during the service. Though technology is excellent, live Zoom meetings inevitably encounter technological issues. So, typically, we ask our partners to send us a prerecorded video from their phones, and we edit it accordingly and show it to the church. Our local partners stop by in person and send us promotional videos.
- **Annually,** we host a Missions Conference. A.T. Lowrey was instrumental both in our church and in the COG.



He is deceased, but his widow still attends. We started our annual A.T. Lowry Missions Conference six years ago to create missions awareness and honor his widow and legacy. At this conference, we host all our global partners. Due to logistics, the five Nigerian pastors send us videos, but we host the rest of our international and local partners. This conference aims to raise awareness of missions and support for all our partners. While we have a special guest speaker, the real aim is to have each international and local leader share what they are doing, why our support matters, and how we can renew our motivation and forge a plan for our mission as a church.

Commitment

Church must remain committed to doing God's work in the world. William Tyndale said, "The Church is the one institution that exists for those outside it." CCC's commitment is to this task. We have not accomplished all we feel we can or should do. We are on a journey to discover how to join God's mission better. But our commitment is to honor God in our world.

The late John Stott said, "We must be global Christians with a global vision because our God is a global God." This is why we commit to helping people grow up in their faith, grow together in community, and grow out in missions. We are dedicated to prayer, the study of the Bible, and discovering what it means for

us as a church to join God's mission and work for Him.

Conclusion

We tell people that CCC is a great place to call home. I am sure you feel the same about your church. Each church is unique and must discover its role in the neighborhood and the world. Not every plan will be the same, but our commitment to God's mission is the same.

Mission is not just about what we do; mission is about who we are and how we live our lives for God's purposes. I do not want to confuse "being" with "doing." I only share the above examples to illustrate our attempts to partner with God as a church doing a mission.

I aim to ensure those implementing the mission have the support they need and deserve. I get to serve the leadership who makes these things happen. CCC reaches into our neighborhood and out to the nations, not because I do the work. I work with those who do the job. I meet weekly with staff, monthly (or as needed) with church leaders, and look for ways to interact personally with our local and global ministry partners. If you have the privilege of serving a church of 30 with no staff (which I understand) or a larger church with multiple pastors, perhaps these mission aspects could be valuable. ■

Randy Eaton, D.Min., Ph.D. (abd) is senior pastor of Cross Community Church in Palm Beach Gardens, Florida.



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LIVING WHAT WE BELIEVE 100 SERIES VOL 1	LIVING WHAT WE BELIEVE 100 SERIES VOL 2	LIVING WHAT WE BELIEVE 100 SERIES VOL 3	Chapters 1-3
<u>January</u>	<u>February</u>	<u>March</u>	<u>April</u>
5 Weeks	4 Weeks	4 Weeks	4 Weeks
How Will I Be Remembered?	"A Spirit-Baptized People"	"A Healed People"	"An Expectant People"
Chapters 4-8	LIVING WHAT WE BELIEVE 100 SERIES VOL 4	LIVING WHAT WE BELIEVE 100 SERIES VOL 5	LIVING WHAT WE BELIEVE 100 SERIES VOL 6
<u>May</u>	<u>June</u>	<u>July</u>	<u>August</u>
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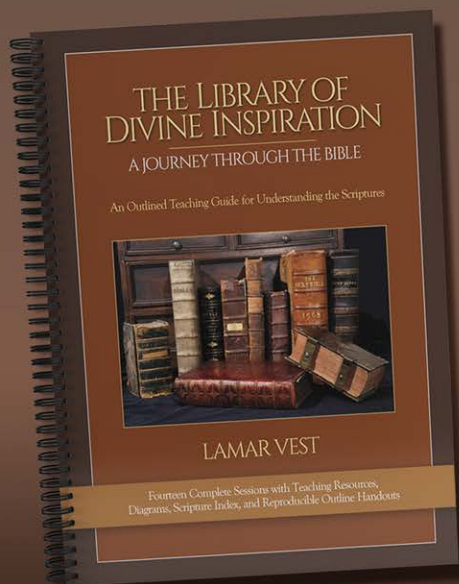
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LEGAL NOTES

DENNIS WATKINS

Considering Cybersecurity



Introduction

In my recent years, one of the greatest professional enjoyments has been working with outstanding students from Lee University. These students, some of whom are in law school or will be attending law school, also have proven to be extremely dedicated and devout young people. This has been very encouraging to me. I have asked two of my paralegals/re-

search assistants, Elizabeth Poarch and Grayson Cook, to write a basic article on the subject of cyber security. With that as a backdrop, here are their basic considerations:

A concern we have seen pass through our office is the ongoing effort to protect digital data in an increased age of cybercrime. How can we defend church and personal information from



falling prey to fraud, identity theft, or extortion? It is important to stay proactive and vigilant in your online presence to mitigate cyberattacks long-term. Forming healthy cyber security habits will help deter this unwanted crime.

What Is Cybersecurity?

Cybersecurity is considered the practice of defending devices, networks, and digital data against very real invisible threats. Cyberattacks with the goal of exploiting/extorting money or corrupting sensitive data have become more common and elaborate with time. Hence, as personal and/or church networks grow more intricate, a variety of security solutions are necessary to manage this level of risk.

Here's the Truth

Implementing effective cybersecurity solutions is particularly challenging because there are now more digital devices than the number of people on planet Earth. Hackers want to breach and steal your data, so how can we reduce this level of sophisticated crime?

Fortunately, there are tangible steps that can diminish this degree of risk:

- 1. *Protect your devices.*** At a minimum, run security software on every device from which you access personal or sensitive information. Having security software installed on your devices, such as an antivirus and firewall,

can help defend against various attacks. However, be sure that the download software is from a reputable source like an official app store or trusted vendor and reseller websites. Be sure to keep this software updated regularly to detect the latest threats.

- 2. *Protect data.*** Encrypt all sensitive data using credible software and 'back up' devices often to an off-site cloud server or an external drive. Encryption is to ward against hacking attempts from outside users, and regular backups safeguard against data loss due to device failure, theft, or any other unexpected events. And although it may be considered an overt warning, be aware of a technique often used by cyber criminals called *phishing*. *Phishing* is considered a cyberattack by email, phone, social media, or "social engineering" techniques to manipulate and trick the user into sharing sensitive information. This could be anything from passwords, account numbers, or downloading malicious files corrupting a personal device. This tactic is very common and easy to fall victim to with the right manipulation. That said, always be sure to ask the right questions and verify money transfers and/or sensitive information over the phone with a credentialed employee or loved one.



3. Use safe connections. Never access sensitive information over public Wi-Fi or access a device that has private information on a free public domain. If it is vital to reach this information in public, consider using a cellular connection. A service provider on a mobile device is a safer connection than a public forum. Maintaining secure connections would also be exercising common safety practices; do not leave your devices unattended in public for an unauthorized individual to access or steal.

4. Share wisely. Do not overshare information on social media or other varying platforms. This paints an easy target for cyber criminals to “social engineer” fraudulent activity in your name. This might leave you and other loved ones vulnerable to identity theft, cyberattacks, and scams. Always exercise good judgment and discernment when sharing digitally.

5. Use proper authentication and pass words. As a general reminder, when accessing private or corporate systems, maintain and protect individualized login credentials. It is important to use unique passwords with varying symbols, numbers, and capitalization. Configure devices to auto-lock, and do not share login

passwords with others. Additionally, consider using security measures like multifactor authentication for sensitive data.

As the proliferation of data continues to surge, certain regulations must be followed to protect privacy. Cyber security compliance is considered the standard that corporations adhere to and regulatory requirements protecting the confidentiality, integrity, and availability of information. This is established by different regulatory agencies, laws, and governmental entities. Cyber security compliance is applicable to any organization that accesses and moves data from one location to another. This leaves them exposed to a potential cyberattack, placing affiliated churches, organizations, and personal data at risk.

Conclusion

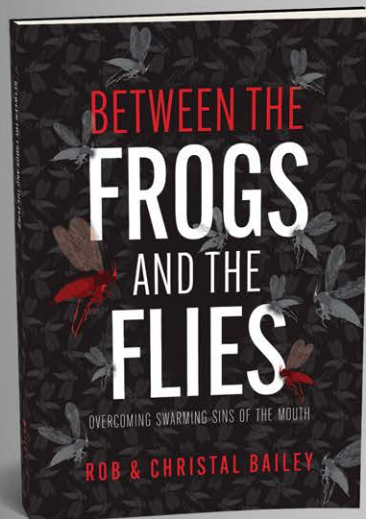
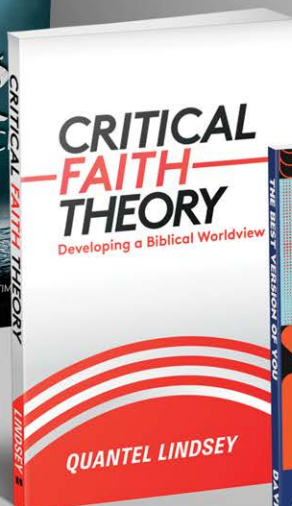
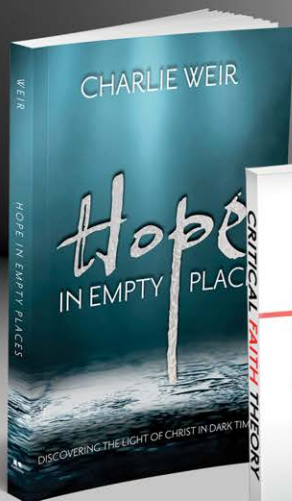
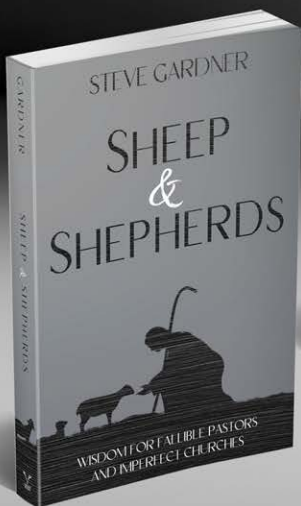
These are only basic principles in consideration of this topic, but adhering to these initial suggestions will go a long way in preventing cybersecurity misery for you and your church. ■

Dennis Watkins is legal counsel for the Church of God. The writer is not engaged in rendering legal or other professional services herein. If legal advice or expert assistance is required, the services of a competent professional should be sought.

Special thanks to Grayson Cook and Elizabeth Poarch for their assistance in writing this article.

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IRS Stops Processing of New ERC Claims



On September 14, 2023, the Internal Revenue Service announced that it would immediately halt the processing of new Employee Retention Credit (ERC) claims through at least December 31, 2023 – and most likely through most of the first quarter of 2024. This moratorium was due in large part to the IRS’s belief that new ERC claims are largely

“dubious,” and the IRS believes that it needs more time for enhanced review of those claims.

This step by the IRS is further confirmation of its commitment to crack down on ineligible and even fraudulent claims that are made on the pandemic-era program. The IRS has reiterated its warning against aggressive



promoters of the ERC who take a contingency fee from the organizations' ERC claims. The IRS has already initiated over 250 criminal investigations into aggressive ERC companies, and at least 15 of those criminal investigations have resulted in federal charges being filed.

In its' announcement, the IRS also provided several links for organizations that need help determining eligibility for the ERC, including a new question and answers guide that acts as a decision tree for organizations exploring the ERC or wanting to determine whether their claims are valid. The entire IRS Notice is available at <https://www.irs.gov/newsroom/to-protect-taxpayers-from-scams-irs-orders-immediate-stop-to-new-employee-retention-credit-processing-amid-surge-of-questionable-claims-concerns-from-tax-pros>.

Depending on where your church is in the ERC process, the following suggestions are offered:

- **If you have already made an ERC claim, have received your funds, and are now wondering if you were eligible**—You should reach out to a trusted tax professional for an objective assessment of your eligibility. If you determine that you were ineligible for part or all of

your ERC claim, the IRS has a settlement program for taxpayers who made an ERC claim that they believe to be in error. Visit the IRS's website (www.irs.gov) to access more details on the "payback" process.

- **If you have already made an ERC claim, have not received your funds, and are now wondering if you were eligible**—It is recommended that you still reach out to a trusted tax professional to determine whether your claim is eligible. Then, if you determine that you are ineligible for some or all of the claim, you may withdraw the claim while it is being processed.

The IRS noted that payouts for existing claims will continue during the moratorium period, but at a slower pace due to detailed compliance reviews. The standard processing goal will increase from 90 days to 180 days (or longer if the IRS determines that the claim warrants further review or audit).

- **If you have not yet made an ERC claim**—You must wait to submit your claim until the moratorium on processing the ERC is lifted, which will be at least December 31, 2023. The date will be most likely extend-



ed into 2024, depending on how long it takes the IRS to engage in its enhanced review of current ERC claims. The IRS recommends that you work with a trusted tax professional to determine eligibility before submitting an ERC claim.

If your church **IS** eligible for the ERC, you should certainly keep the funds provided or keep your application for funds active. However, we have repeatedly suggested that you use a local accounting firm that provides services to non-profits to assist you in your application for ERC credits. Problems have arisen because many contingency fee companies, not well versed in tax laws, have popped up to “help” churches claim this credit without adequately training or supervising their employees. Because these companies get a fee based upon how much the church gets from the government, some have “stretched” the numbers to recover a larger amount from the government; thus, a larger fee for themselves.

Regardless of how reputable the contingency fee company is that you used, it is recommended that you have a trusted certified public accounting firm review your ERC application to make sure that proper credits were claimed. If it is determined by the IRS that you wrongly claimed ERC, the

church will be required to return the excess funds, pay interest on the money, and pay a substantial penalty. If the claims were blatantly false, the IRS could also file civil or criminal fraud charges as well.

It must be remembered that the ERC does **NOT** apply to the wages of ministers. Only FICA employees are included in the calculation of the ERC credit.

NOTE: Portions of this article were provided by CapinCrouse, a national accounting firm that specializes in non-profits and churches. ■

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Art Rhodes
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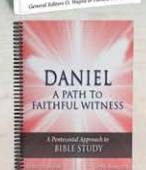
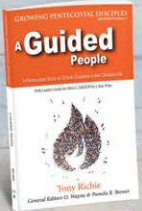
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DOCTRINE AND POLITY

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SPIRIT-FILLED WORSHIP

Through its Spirit-filled worship, the Pentecostal Movement has radically transformed Christianity in the last 100 years. Historian Walter Hollenweger has stated that Pentecostalism's most important contribution to the larger Christian tradition has been in the practice of worship.¹ Explaining the phenomenal growth of Pentecostalism, Donald E. Miller and Tetsunao Yamamori write, "The engine of Pentecostalism is its worship,"² and at the center of Pentecostal worship is the Holy Spirit. The Church of God emphasizes the value and importance of worship.³ This brief study points out a number of biblical emphases regarding Spirit-filled worship. Although it does not answer every question about worship, it is a starting point for further study.

I. WHAT IS WORSHIP?

Before going any further, it may be helpful to sharpen our study by defining the word "worship." Some people think that worship consists only in singing,

as in the phrase "praise and worship." While it is true that singing can be an expression of worship, worship is much more than just singing. Alfred P. Gibbs (*Worship: The Christian's Highest Occupation*) offers a definition that emphasizes the spiritual attitude of the worshiper. He writes, "Worship is the occupation of the heart, not with its needs, or even with its blessings, but with God Himself." Gibbs' definition emphasizes two important characteristics of worship: (1) Worship must come from the heart. (2) Worship must be focused upon God, not upon ourselves. While this is helpful, our source of ultimate authority is the Scripture. Therefore, at this point we will examine the biblical terminology used to define worship.

The Bible uses three primary terms that are translated "worship." The first term is "to serve," which signifies a lifestyle of commitment and allegiance. The second term is "to fear," which refers to the attitude of reverence. The

¹ Walter J. Hollenweger, *The Pentecostals: The Charismatic Movement in the Churches* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Pub. House, 1st U.S. edn, 1972), p. 466. Cf. Harvey G. Cox, *Fire from Heaven: The Rise of Pentecostal Spirituality and the Reshaping of Religion in the 21st Century* (London: Cassell, 1996), pp. 139-57.

² Donald E. Miller and Tetsunao Yamamori, *Global Pentecostalism: The New Face of Christian Social Engagement* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2007), p. 23.

³ See Church of God, *Minutes of the International General Assembly* (Cleveland, TN: Pathway Press, 2016), p. 36.



third term is “to worship,” which fundamentally means the act of bowing down to pay homage.

A. Serve: A Lifestyle of Worship

The Bible speaks of worship as “serving” God. When the LORD calls Israel to meet with Him on Mount Sinai, He says to them, “you shall **serve** God on this mountain” (Exodus 3:12). To serve God means to devote oneself fully to God. Serving God is a commitment to total allegiance, a lifestyle of dedication to God and to God alone. The most important New Testament text regarding worship as a lifestyle is probably Paul’s admonition to the Romans. He writes, “I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable **service**” (Romans 12:1). The apostle Paul declares that our worship to God must include our whole selves, which includes our bodies. To serve God means to give honor and glory to God through a daily lifestyle of obedience and behavior that reflects a committed relationship.

B. Fear: An Attitude of Worship

The word “fear” is another term that can mean “worship.” Although it can mean “to be terrified or scared,” fear can also mean “to reverence and honor.” It is this idea of honor and reverence that makes the fear of the LORD suitable as an attitude of worship. After the Israelites had dedicated themselves to serve the LORD, Joshua added the following instructions: “Now therefore, **fear** the

LORD, serve Him in sincerity and in truth” (Joshua 24:14). To fear God is to have reverence and awe for His power and authority as God. The fear of God is an inner disposition or attitude of deep respect for God. Therefore, it represents the emotional foundation of worship.

C. Bowing Down: Actions of Worship

The third biblical term that we will consider is “to worship,” which fundamentally means the act of bowing down to pay homage. In biblical times, the Greek and Hebrew words meaning “to bow or kneel down” are expanded to include any act of worship or any ritual action that pays homage to God and that expresses veneration to God. These actions include feasts, sacrifices, prayers, songs, art, music, or dance. They can be formal liturgical acts, ceremonies in private, worship acts within the family, or any expression of worship in the Church. The word “worship” is used for the first time in the story of Abraham’s sacrifice of Isaac. The LORD tests Abraham and commands him to sacrifice Isaac his only son. When Abraham’s party reaches the mountain where the sacrifice is to take place, we read the following: “And Abraham said to his young men, ‘Stay here with the donkey; the lad and I will go yonder and **worship**, and we will come back to you’” (Genesis 22:5).

Whether it be the giving of Abraham’s son, the giving of a lamb, the giving of money, or the giving of our time, worship involves giving to God something that is valuable to us.



D. A Biblical Definition of Worship

Our study of biblical terminology leads to the conclusion that worship is expressed in three interrelated concepts: (1) Worship is a way of life, a commitment to God; (2) Worship is an inner disposition of love, fear, and reverence; and (3) Worship is expressed through specific acts that show our gratitude to God and our esteem for Him. All three of these elements make up the total worship of the Christian. Spirit-filled worship must involve a worshipful lifestyle, a worshipful heart, and worshipful actions. Therefore, I would define true worship in the following way:

True worship is giving God the honor and esteem that is due to him as God. Worship is expressed through the believer's commitment, disposition, and actions.

II. THE CHARACTERISTICS OF SPIRIT-FILLED WORSHIP

A. Worship in Spirit and Truth

The most important lesson regarding worship is that **true worship is empowered by the Holy Spirit**. Without the Holy Spirit, true worship is impossible to attain. True worship is initiated by the Holy Spirit, guided by the Holy Spirit, and inspired by the Holy Spirit.

The key New Testament text for understanding the value of the Holy Spirit in worship is John 4:18-26, where we read about Jesus' encounter with the

Samaritan woman at Jacob's Well. Jesus was traveling north from Judea to Galilee, and he paused at Jacob's Well, where he met a Samaritan woman who had come to draw water.

The woman was quite surprised when Jesus asked her for a drink of water, because the Jews had no dealings with the Samaritans. Perceiving that Jesus was a prophet, the woman said to Him,

"Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, and you Jews say that in Jerusalem is the place where one ought to worship." Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe Me, the hour is coming when you will neither on this mountain, nor in Jerusalem, worship the Father. You worship what you do not know; we know what we worship, for salvation is of the Jews. But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him. God is spirit, and those who worship Him must **worship in spirit and truth**" (John 4:18-25).

The conversation about worship teaches us several valuable lessons. First, regarding the place of worship, Jesus points out that the day is coming when worshipers will gather anywhere and everywhere to worship God. The New Covenant and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit will make worship a universal experience. Location will no longer be important, because God will dwell



in the hearts of His people and in the midst of the Church, wherever it is located.

Second, regarding the object of worship, Jesus declares that the Samaritans did not know who they worshiped. The Samaritans had only a partial faith, because they accepted only the Old Testament books of Genesis through Deuteronomy as Scripture. By excluding most of the Old Testament, they had failed to adopt much of the biblical faith. The Samaritans represent anyone who believes only part of the Bible, but they do not accept the whole Bible. That kind of faith is incomplete and imperfect.

According to Jesus, the object of true worship is “the Father.” Christians worship Jehovah, the God of the Bible. There is no other God (Isaiah 45:21). We worship Jehovah because he is creator of all things, He is our only Savior, and He is our covenant God. To worship “in truth” means that we do not worship other gods; we do not worship created things; we do not worship angels; we do not worship demons; and we do not worship other humans. When we say that we worship only Jehovah, we are including the entire Trinity—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The first chapter of John’s Gospel reveals that Jesus is God (John 1:1). All things were created by the Father through Jesus (John 1:3). To worship “in truth” means that we worship Jesus as our Savior, Sanctifier, Spirit Baptizer, Healer, and soon coming King.

It is important for pastors and worship leaders to remember that worship not only inspires, but it also teaches. Most Christians learn their theology in the Sunday worship services. Our beliefs about God should be expressed in our worship. We learn about God through the songs, the prayers, the testimonies, and the sermons. Our worship embodies our theology, celebrates our theology, and communicates our theology. Therefore, we must conduct our worship services so that they teach sound doctrine. When evaluating our worship, we should ask what kind of theology our worship conveys.

Third, regarding the nature of worship, Jesus taught that “true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth.” In John’s Gospel, Jesus is the truth. He is “full of grace and truth” (John 1:15, 17). Jesus speaks the truth and testifies to the truth (John 8:40, 45, 46; 18:37). In fact, Jesus Christ **is the truth**. He is “the way, the truth, and the life” (John 14:6). Therefore, those who worship in truth are worshiping the Father in the Spirit and in the Truth (Jesus). Jesus’ statement hints at the fact that true worship involves the entire Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

To worship God in spirit and truth is necessary because God is spirit. Earlier in the Gospel of John, we learned that to become children of God we must be “born of the Spirit” (John 3:5-6). Now we discover that the Spirit is necessary not only for the new birth but also for



true worship. We are born by the Spirit, and we also worship in the Spirit.

The Holy Spirit is the power of worship that enables us to connect with God. The apostle Paul recognizes the importance of the Spirit in worship. He writes, “For we are the circumcision, who **worship God in the Spirit**, rejoice in Christ Jesus, and have no confidence in the flesh” (Philippians 3:3). Without the Holy Spirit, we do not have the ability to worship God acceptably or freely. The human flesh is weak and incapable of worship. Only “in the Spirit” can we truly worship God.

According to Paul, being filled with the Spirit leads naturally to joyful worship. Worship in the Spirit includes “singing” and “giving thanks.” Paul writes,

And do not be drunk with wine, in which is dissipation; but be filled with the **Spirit**, speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the LORD, giving thanks always for all things to God the Father in the name of our LORD Jesus Christ” (Ephesians 5:18-20).

We tend to separate the two terms—“spirit” and “truth”—but Jesus makes the point that genuine worship requires a merging of both. We know that Jesus is the truth, but the Spirit is also the truth. The Spirit and the truth are intimately connected. Later in the Gospel of John, Jesus will teach

his disciples that the Holy Spirit is the “Spirit of truth.” Jesus says, “And I will pray the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may abide with you forever—the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive” (John 14:16-17; 15:26). Furthermore, as the Spirit of truth, the Spirit will guide us into the truth and teach us all things: “When He, the Spirit of truth, has come, He will guide you into all truth” (John 16:13). “But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things” (John 14:26).

B. Rejoicing in the Spirit and Praying in the Spirit

To worship God in the Spirit includes several related elements. In the New Testament, Spirit inspired worship is characterized by rejoicing in the Spirit and praying in the Spirit.

The Holy Spirit produces joy. The apostle Paul tells us that joy is a fruit of the Spirit. He states, “But the fruit of the **Spirit** is love, **joy**, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control” (Galatians 5:22-23). In fact, joy is so important that it is a characteristic of the Kingdom: “For the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and **joy in the Holy Spirit**” (Romans 14:17).

Prayer is an act of worship, and every worship service includes prayer. When we pray, we must have the Spirit’s help in order to make our prayers



honest and effective. Paul explains: “Likewise the **Spirit** also helps in our weaknesses. For we do not know what we should **pray** for as we ought, but the Spirit himself makes intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered” (Romans 8:26). We may not know what we really need or how to ask in the proper manner, but the Holy Spirit directs, empowers, and energizes our prayers. Both Paul and Jude emphasize the necessity of praying in the Spirit. Paul encourages the Church to be “praying always with all prayer and supplication **in the Spirit**” (Ephesians 6:18). Jude adds that when believers pray “in the Spirit” they are building their faith: “But you, beloved, building yourselves up on your most holy faith, **praying in the Holy Spirit**” (Jude 1:20). Worship in the Spirit includes praying in the Spirit.

C. The Gifts of the Spirit

Worship in the Spirit includes the gifts of the Spirit. If it is necessary that we worship “in spirit and in truth,” then all aspects of the Spirit’s work must be considered. One way that the Spirit manifests Himself in our worship is through the gifts of the Spirit. In most cases, the term “spiritual gifts” is a translation of the Greek word *charismata*, which is derived from the root word *charis*, meaning **grace**. Therefore, the spiritual gifts might more accurately be called **grace gifts**. Spiritual gifts are part of salvation—they are God’s grace flowing through us. As gifts of God’s grace, the spiritual gifts are not hidden talents;

they are supernatural endowments from God. The gifts are part of our participation in the work of God, the ministry of God’s grace, the church, and salvation. The spiritual gifts are ministry through which we give to one another (see 1 Peter 4:10-11; Romans 12:4-8; Ephesians 4:7-13; and 1 Corinthians 12-14).

D. Freedom in the Spirit

The Spirit gives freedom in worship. Worship in the Spirit allows for the freedom and the movement of the Holy Spirit. The apostle Paul states, “Now the LORD is the Spirit; and where the Spirit of the LORD is, there is liberty” (2 Corinthians 3:17). Worship in the Spirit is motivated and moved by the Holy Spirit, and it is empowered by the Holy Spirit. Worship in the Spirit gives liberty in praise, liberty in prayer, and liberty to rejoice. In the Spirit, we have liberty to “shout for joy and be glad” (Psalm 35:27).

Worship in the Spirit produces liberty for every kind of spiritual manifestation. However, liberty always has a purpose and a goal. The Spirit gives liberty so that the Church may minister to one another and reach out to unbelievers. Therefore, the liberty of the Spirit has certain boundaries. Freedom does not stand in opposition to order and decorum. Churches have their own preferences and habits regarding the order of service, but they do practice a certain order, and that order ensures that liberty does not degenerate into chaos. The members of the body must submit to the Head, which is Christ; and Christ



has put into place the pastors and leaders who oversee the worship.

This article was originally published in November 2017.

CONCLUSION

Worship is at the heart of Pentecostal identity. If Pentecostalism is to continue as a vibrant movement of the Holy Spirit, it must transmit the heart of the movement to the next generation. The heart of the movement is more than statements of doctrine; because Pentecostalism is more than just a list of certain beliefs. Our beliefs and practices combine to form a distinct spirituality. For example, the theological heart of Pentecostalism is the Fivefold Gospel—Jesus is Savior, sanctifier, Spirit baptizer, healer, and soon-coming king. However, the Fivefold Gospel is more than a list of beliefs; it is a way of being in the world; it is a spirituality. Spirituality, however, is not a static attainment. It must be nurtured, developed, instilled, and made steadfast by means of spiritual practices. For Pentecostalism, these spiritual practices include uninhibited worship, tarrying in prayer, seasons of fasting, caring for one another, bearing witness to the world, self-sacrifice, preaching the whole Gospel, healing the sick, water baptism, the Lord's Supper, footwashing, immersion in God's Word, and seeking for the Spirit's gifts. All of these are done with a sense of urgency and longing in light of the soon return of Jesus. Worship is at the center of our spirituality and our experience of God, and the manner in which we worship affects our way of life, our desires, our goals, and our future. ■

BOOKS FOR FURTHER STUDY

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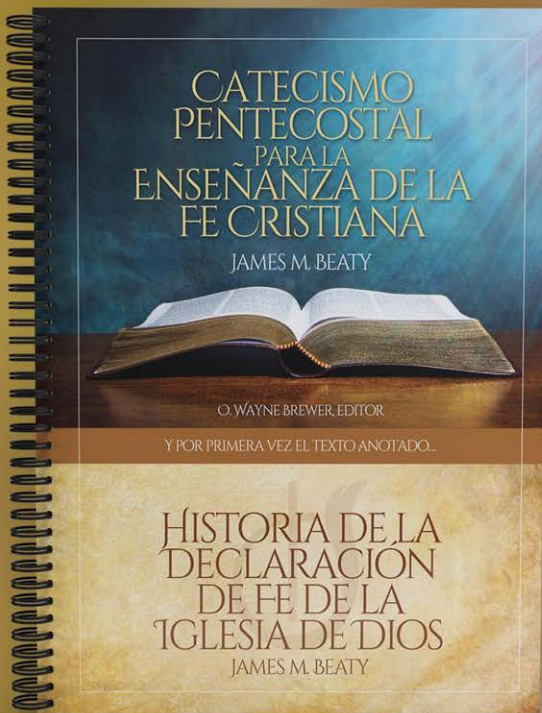
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INSIGHTS AND OBSERVATIONS SHARED TO INSPIRE CONVERSATION

TIM HILL, GENERAL OVERSEER

When You Are Being Sifted

Ministry Demands a Process

Ministry takes on a new meaning when you find your faith being tried and tested. Many people want to be in ministry until they realize that it often demands the sifting process.

At the Last Supper, Jesus warned Simon Peter that a test of faith was coming: “Simon, Simon! Indeed, Satan has asked for you, that he may sift you as wheat” (Luke 22:31, NKJV). The outspoken disciple seemed to be in the same predicament as Job when Satan sought to put him to the test (Job 1–2). Satan wanted to “sift Peter as wheat,” which means that he wished to shake Peter’s faith so forcefully that he would fall, proving that God’s faithful servant was lacking in stamina and faith.

Being Sifted

Sift as wheat is a figure of speech that could also be expressed as “shake someone apart” or “break a person down.” Amos 9:9 gives us a similar image of God shaking Israel: “For I will give the command and will shake Israel along with the other nations as grain is shaken in a sieve, yet not one true kernel will be lost” (NLT).

In biblical times, wheat or other grain was sifted through a sieve or large strainer. As it was shaken violently, the dirt and other impurities that clung to the grain during the threshing process would separate from the good, usable grain.

In sifting Peter and the other disciples as wheat, Satan’s goal was to crush them and wreck their faith. In truth, the adversary wants to destroy the faith of every believer (John 10:10). But Jesus assured Peter, “I have pleaded in prayer for you, Simon, that your faith should not fail. So when you have repented and turned to me again, strengthen your brothers” (Luke 22:32 NLT). Peter’s leadership role in the early church proved that the Lord’s prayer for Peter was answered.

The very thought of Jesus standing in the place of prayer on my behalf is always stunning to me. I recall one particular time He must have surely been praying for me.

Responding to the Process

Some time ago, I walked into a church in the Midwest where I was invited to speak. Prior to the service, there was a minister’s gathering where



I spent an hour getting to know some new candidates for ordination, as well as renewing acquaintances with other ministers I had not seen in a while. For an hour, I had smiled, laughed, and engaged in conversation, but as I was going from one person to the next, in my mind I was reliving the events of my day. Earlier that day, I had experienced a most difficult and unusual situation.

Due to certain and well-publicized stands I had taken on some particularly concerning issues, I had actually been threatened with physical harm. Even more troubling was the alarm placed upon my family. It wasn't the first time. My own personal safety had been targeted before when I've traveled and spoken on various platforms of ministry and even broader public interest. However, this time was different because it involved those I love the most. It was a very heavy burden to bear and had become quite taxing, realizing that every time I left home, I had to make sure added protective security was in place.

Following the fellowship time where I was to speak, I was escorted to the auditorium and when service started, I did my best to engage with the worship singers as I dutifully lifted my hands in an effort at praise and worship. Later, I obeyed the instruction of the host pastor to turn and greet those sitting near me with handshakes and smiles.

I was working hard not to display any level of concern I was feeling caused by the various disruptions from

the intensity I had experienced that very day. Before entering the building, I purposed that I would not allow other matters occupying my mind to interrupt the ministry of the Word of God. Looking back, I don't know if I was very successful but I tried as best I could.

At a point when the worship team moved into singing the old hymn, "Rock of Ages," my host leaned over to speak to me in the middle of the song and said, "I don't know what has happened with you today but it is a heavy and serious matter." Then he said, "The Lord wants you to know, 'It is coming to an end.'"

In a few seconds, I indicated that indeed some things had jumped into my travel bag that day and they were not the usual issues that come with carrying the burden of the church. As a matter of fact, on that particular day, I would have gladly traded anything I was dealing with for a good, old-fashioned church fuss, concerning selecting new carpet and the color of paint or just about anything else.

At the words, "It's coming to an end," I gained the strength that I needed to get up and preach. Later in my room, I reflected on the day and the words the host pastor had spoken to me. I determined that it was all part of the sifting and that it was all for a purpose.

Something tied to my future depended on my response to the process.



Sifting Our Faith

I began to recall what Jesus had said to Simon Peter. Jesus did not say that He would save Peter from this testing. But what He did say was that He was praying for him. He also indicated that His prayer would be effective.

To us, it may look like Peter's faith failed him; but this would not be Christ's assessment at all. Peter's faith did falter some in a crushing moment when all he had hoped for and banked his life on was nailed to a cross. After all, Peter had denied that he knew Jesus.

But remember that along with John, Peter was one of the very first disciples to arrive at the empty tomb. Only a few days later, he stood preaching on the Day of Pentecost, and in a single moment, 3,000 people were saved!

His faith had been sifted, as God removed the chaff. But when he was purified, he was like a Gospel Lion. The Epistles of First and Second Peter show us a developed and matured faith—a faith that was aware and ever vigilant against the Enemy, a faith that would stand the test.

The Results of Sifting

One of two things will happen when we are being sifted. We will come out on the other side with a damaged faith or a developed faith. When I recall that Jesus is praying for me, I'm strengthened and encouraged to face

the trial. When I recall that my response is crucial to the end result, I'm encouraged to endure the trial with grace.

Sometimes, our story is one of endurance, abandon, and surrender. Our goal in each trial is to do our best to exemplify with near exactness what the apostle Peter meant when he wrote:

So be truly glad. There is wonderful joy ahead, even though you must endure many trials for a little while. These trials will show that your faith is genuine. It is being tested as fire tests and purifies gold—though your faith is far more precious than mere gold. So when your faith remains strong through many trials, it will bring you much praise and glory and honor on the day when Jesus Christ is revealed to the whole world (1 Peter 1:6-7 NLT).

Being sifted as wheat. No one likes it, but remember that purity demands it. Faith is strengthened by it, and value escalates enormously because of it.

Job had a good take on being sifted. We see it in his words found in Job 23:10 "He knows the way that I take and when he has tried me (sifted me) I shall come forth as gold" (NASB 1995). ■

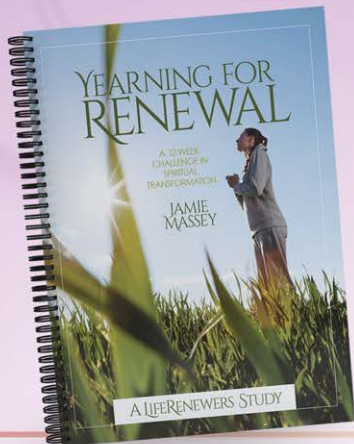
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Dr. M. Thomas Propes and Dr. John D. Childers of Church of God World Missions would like to extend a "Special Invitation" for you to attend the Inspire Southeast Pastors Coalition event taking place in Cleveland Tennessee, on March 18-19, 2024.

COGWM Pastors Coalition connects the World with Pastors & Congregations that desire to make a Kingdom impact. Coalition partners join efforts with indigenous leaders to train, strategize, and use their resources to help reach the last, the least, and the lost of Humanity.

The upcoming informational & inspirational event will take place at Westmore Church of God on Monday evening, March 18th from 7pm-8:30pm and will continue on Tuesday, March 19th from 8:30am-2pm (Breakfast and Lunch included).

Our host hotel is the Towneplace Suites by Marriott. Use the QR code below to access the INSPIRE Website to locate the hotels and registration link.



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Church of God HIGHLIGHTS

*Abbreviated items from Faith News, the Church of God's official news source,
between September 1 and December 31, 2023.*

To subscribe or to view complete articles, visit faithnews.cc.

Lee's Center for Pentecostal Preaching Named for Dr. Paul L. Walker

November 21, 2023—Cleveland, TN—Lee University's Board of Directors has unanimously voted to name the university's new Center for Pentecostal Preaching in honor of the late Rev. Paul L. Walker, Ph.D.

Walker served as the chairman of Lee's Board of Directors from 1974–84 and as a liaison advocate from the Church of God Executive Committee, also serving as the general overseer for the Church of God from 1996–2000. He pastored Atlanta's Mount Paran Church of God for more than three decades and was among several generations of the Walker family to attend Lee and contribute significantly to the university's development.

Walker's career in pastoral and executive leadership was marked throughout by a reputation for inspired, dynamic preaching, such that he is considered among the finest pulpit orators to emerge in the modern Pentecostal Movement. Such a track record of consistent, exemplary preaching makes Walker a perfect honoree for the center now bearing his name.

"There would be nothing more satisfying to my dad than to know that under his name ministers are being trained to be effective preachers. He would be thrilled with this recognition, said Lee President Dr. Mark Walker. "The entire Walker family is grateful to the Board of Directors for this honor."

The program is being funded through Lilly Endowment's Compelling Preaching Initiative. The aim of the initiative is to foster and support preaching that inspires, encourages, and guides people to come to know and love God and to live out their Christian faith more fully.

The Paul L. Walker Center for Pentecostal Preaching is the core of Lee's proposed Compelling Preaching Initiative program that will cultivate compelling and transformative preaching among aspiring and active Pentecostal preachers.

For more information about the Paul L. Walker Center for Pentecostal Preaching, call (423) 303-5080.



Historic Romanian Congregation Celebrates 50 Years

October 19, 2023—Chicago, Ill.—Philadelphia Romanian Church of God, Chicago, was founded in 1973 by pastor George W. Galis with a group of 35 Romanian immigrants. This weekend, the congregation will celebrate their fiftieth (50th) anniversary.

Philadelphia is the first Romanian congregation organized as a Church of God in the United States and has played an important role in the development of the Romanian Pentecostal Convention and Church of God Romanian Territory Office (RTO).

“We are looking forward to celebrating together 50 years of God’s goodness at Philadelphia Church,” said pastor Florin Cimpean, who also serves as administrative bishop for the RTO. “The year 2023 is the Year of Jubilee for the Philadelphia Church—50 years of open doors of God’s goodness and faithfulness, of divine power and uncountable miracles, amazing experiences, and victories.”

Over the decades, the church has met in five different buildings, worshipping in the current location since 1994, but will soon transition to a new campus, commonly known as the “Thecla Campus.” In its 50-year history, Philadelphia Church has had only three senior pastors: George W. Galis, Peter Lascu, and Florin T. Cimpean.

“This speaks to the maturity and stability of our amazing community,” Cimpean stated. “I am so humbled and overwhelmed by the unmerited opportunity granted to me to serve the awesome people of Philadelphia Church for the last 22 years. I am standing in this moment with a heart filled with gratitude and love for God and the awesome people of this wonderful church. When I look at their beautiful faces, I truly see the face of God radiating through each of them. I see a history of family, faith, faithfulness, friendship, and freedom.”

According to Cimpean, from its beginning, Philadelphia church has become a haven for Romanians who escaped Communist Romania to find a new life and freedom in the United States. Philadelphia Church has been at the forefront of innovation, creativity, and spirituality. It has become an open door and welcoming home for thousands of believers. Philadelphia Church has long been recognized for its worship excellence, the centrality of the Word, friendly environment, depth of its relationships, and missionary vision.

“Our church has left an undeletable mark on the Romanian diaspora and on society at large,” Cimpean continued. “I can say with much confidence that this 50th year of Philadelphia Church is the best in its history. It is a Kairos year when God is preparing us for greater things to come and is springing forward a synergy of visions, energies, and dreams. As we are preparing to



move to a new campus and cast a new paradigm of ministry, we are visioneering the future and dreaming big dreams worthy of God.”

Philadelphia Church exists for the glory of God and strives to offer a place where unbelievers find salvation and believers become, through training and fellowship, influencers in church and society. The vision is to be a spiritual and relevant church in this generation, impacting its community and taking the gospel around the world.

The schedule of services this weekend includes Friday, October 20, at 7:00 p.m., Saturday, October 21, 6:00 p.m., and Sunday, October 22, 10:00 a.m.

Milestone 90,000th Church of God Credential Presented

October 16, 2023—Cleveland, TN—A historic moment took place last week as Ashlyn Taylor Sanford became the 90,000th minister to receive credentials in the Church of God.

Sanford was welcomed by all five members of the Executive Committee on October 10 during a special ceremony taking place in the General Overseer’s Office at the International Offices. She and her husband, Cody, serve in ministry at the New Life Church of God in Harriman, Tennessee, where her father, Jeffrey Blackburn, is senior pastor. Blackburn also serves as district overseer and had the privilege of officially signing his daughter’s historic Exhorter

Certificate during the ceremony, along with the Tennessee State Overseer, T. Wayne Dority. Ashlyn was surreptitiously transported to Cleveland from Harriman by her parents and husband for the event.



General Overseer Tim Hill presents certificate #90000 to Ashlyn Sanford. Assistant General Overseer David Ramirez looks on.

Ashlyn Sanford, who turns 25 this month, holds a bachelor’s degree in psychology with a minor in Bible, as well as a master’s degree in Marriage and Family Therapy from Lee University. She currently serves, together with her husband, as the Children’s Ministry pastor and Multimedia directors at New Life. Earlier this year, she successfully completed the process for obtaining the Exhorter’s Certificate, the first level of ministry in the Church of God. Upon submission to the state office, the paperwork was processed and a ministerial file number assigned by the Business and Records Department at International Offices. Present at the surprise presentation was the director of



Business and Records for the Church of God, Dr. Raymond Hodge, who reiterated the process of credentialing to Ashlyn and those in attendance.

“Each minister who has ever done ministry in the Church of God gets an individual file number; much like a Social Security number,” Hodge stated. Speaking to Ashlyn, he said, “You are the 90,000th person to hold credentials in the Church of God. When you’ve gone on to Jesus, it will still be your number.”

“To put this into perspective, my number is 24395,” General Overseer Hill said as he personally presented the certificate to Ashlyn. “This is also significant because of Harvest ’24, an initiative that includes emphasis on credentialing younger ministers, and females who feel a call upon their lives to carry out the Great Commission. We have a lot to celebrate on this day.”

“I am so honored by the covering and blessing of the Church of God,” Ashlyn said in response to the presentation. “I am so looking forward to what God has in store for my ministry and the Church of God.”

Ministry Center Dedicated in New York

September 18, 2023—New York, N.Y.—Ebenezer Urban Ministry Center (EUMC) is now open after 12 years in the making. It was dedicated on September

16, 2023, with church and community leaders on hand to cut the ribbon. The following is the account of that journey from EUMC leaders:

EUMC, formerly the Church of God of East Flatbush, has a rich 53-year history of service, community impact, and now property development. In 2011, the Church of God of East Flatbush, under the leadership of Bishop R.C. Hugh Nelson, took a leap of faith and purchased Ebenezer Plaza, two city blocks for \$8.1 million dollars and after rezoning the property, saw its value rise to \$12.5 million.

After serving as landlords to 22 tenants for several years, the congregation began the task of finding the right developer as partner and to secure political support and endorsement through engagement with community boards, Borough Hall, and City Council. Following a long and arduous journey, we were successful in rezoning the property for residential and commercial usage with the blessing of the New York City Council.

The then Borough president of Brooklyn not only endorsed the vision but contributed \$1.5 million toward the project. We completed Ebenezer Plaza in 2023, at which point the congregation moved into a state-of-the-art sanctuary and ministry space on the ground floor and basement with 315 apartments above.



Ebenezer Urban Ministry Center

Ebenezer Plaza is a three-phased, \$364 million project, which began when the Church of God of East Flatbush partnered with Brisa Builders in 2014. Brisa subsequently partnered with Evergreen City and Procida Development Group, and the four formed Ebenezer Plaza Owners LLC to develop 523 affordable housing units while creating a 43,000 square foot ministry space where families could receive spiritual and social services, a new home for the Church, as well as close to 25,000 square feet of commercial retail space.

The grand opening of our ministry center further amplifies our vision to provide tangible services every day of the week to the Brownsville/Brooklyn, NY community. The Ebenezer Urban Ministry Center is located at 660 Powell Street, Brooklyn, NY 11212. Confirmed to be in attendance at the service were NYC Mayor, Eric Adams, Public Advocate

Jumaane Williams, State Senator Zellnor Myrie, Assembly member Monique Chandler-Waterman and HUD Regional Director Alicka Ampry-Samuel.

Church of God General Overseer Tim Hill stated, “Dr. R.C. Hugh Nelson and First Lady Diana Nelson, along with a magnificent team of devoted ministers and volunteers, began with a vision to transform a city and bring hope to the hurting. That vision is now reality with two completed and occupied affordable apartment towers accommodating over 300 families and two more towers are currently being constructed. Amid the towers is the new sanctuary seating more than 900 worshippers. I join with everyone praising God for such a miracle and lasting testimony to the goodness of the Lord and the faithfulness of people with purpose and passion to reap the harvest.” ■

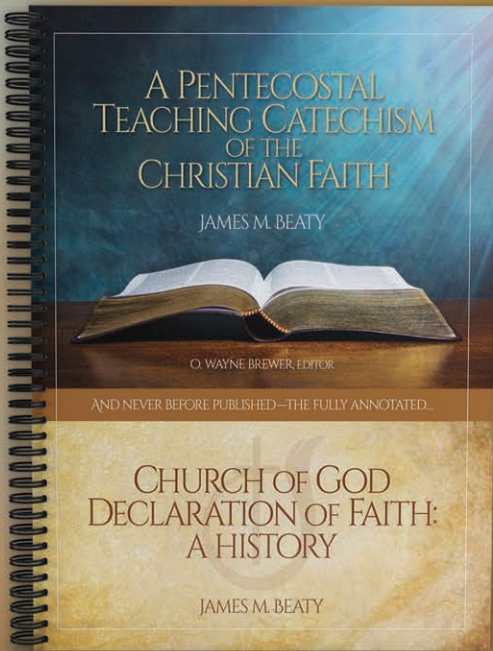
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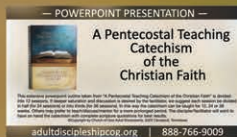
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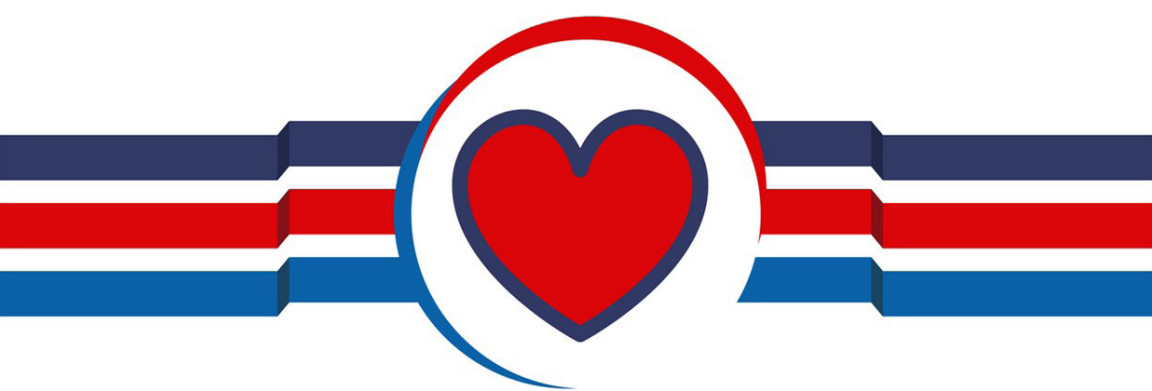


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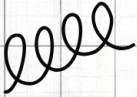


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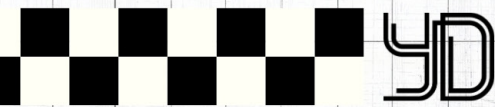
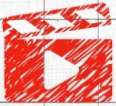


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