

Our Beliefs

The Decision - Believe and Begin

To begin our look at the Church of God, what it is and what it teaches, it is appropriate to ask you to meet us at the cross, for we believe that the cross is the starting point for each Christian. It is there that we come face-to-face with the overwhelming love of God that prompted the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. As Paul put it, “But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8, NIV).

The path of every believer meets and proceeds from the cross. There the price for our sins was completely, wonderfully paid. For each of us, faith’s journey begins at the foot of that rugged, ancient symbol of redemption.

The content and guidelines of that faith are given in the Bible; what God has done and will do is sufficiently stated. The faith, however, is more than knowing what the Bible says and systematically living out its dictums. The faith is also experience. A Christian not only knows Jesus’ teachings, for instance, but has by a decision of the will permitted the risen Christ to live in his or her life.

In a miraculous way, that commitment to Christ is rewarded in the believer with a deep feeling of peace that C. S. Lewis has described as “surprised by joy!” The joy of the Lord is not one of temporary hilarity; rather it is the peaceful inner assurance that God is with me and I am with God—because of Christ. The experience of God working in our lives to forgive and redeem us begins as you and I confess our sins and accept Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. The experience is described well by Bill and Gloria Gaither:

*He touched me, He touched me,
And the joy that floods my soul;
Something happened, and now I know,
He touched me and made me whole.¹*

The Spirit-Filled Life

For many years, one of our ministers, Charles Weber, challenged people to “live out of the overflow.” He spoke of the Spirit-filled life. With similar emphasis, the late Marcus Morgan has stated that for Christians the challenge is to “realize the full influence of His power and presence in our living.” John the Baptist proclaimed,

I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me will come one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not fit to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.—Matthew 3.11, NIV

Jesus himself, at the time of his baptism, “saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove” (Mark 1:10, NIV). Several experiences of the baptism of the Holy Spirit are recorded in the New Testament (Acts 2:1–4; 9:17; 10:44–46; 19:1–7). Jesus sustained the promise just before his ascension, saying, “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you” (Acts 1:8, NIV).

The events in the New Testament account are sufficient to indicate believers can experience the baptism of the Spirit. We could say one's life is saturated with the Holy Spirit or immersed in the Spirit. The word *sanctification* is often used to describe the experience of the Spirit-filled life. Whatever the term used, we believe the infilling of the Spirit in the life of the Christian makes a dynamic difference in the individual's receptivity to the Spirit's leadership and the individual's effectiveness as a witness for Christ.

The believer's experience of the baptism of the Holy Spirit may be viewed from at least four perspectives:

Cleansing. The Holy Spirit cleanses the attitudes, mindset, habits, and spirit of the believer. In the Old Testament, we read of utensils that were set aside to be used exclusively in worship. *Sanctification* is the word used to refer to this cleansing (Ezekiel 42; Daniel 5). The Holy Spirit works in the believer to purify and set aside a person for God's use. (See 1 Peter 1:13–16; Thessalonians 4:3–8; Hebrews 2:11; 10:10.)

Consecration. Consecration (commitment) is the act of the believer. Persons who have accepted forgiveness of sins and the gift of eternal life offer themselves to be fully blessed and used by God. Paul wrote the Christians in Rome,

Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.
—Romans 12:1–2, NIV

Consecration is presenting everything about our personality, including our physical bodies, to God for his use, in a decisive act of worship.

Calling. This is the part of the baptism of the Holy Spirit and the Spirit-filled life on which God and the believer work together. The Spirit cleanses, the believer consecrates himself or herself, and together the Spirit of God and the believer work out the calling. The calling is the task(s) which the believer accepts in the life of the church in order to help evangelize and serve the world. There are many functions in this great task of sharing the gospel, "giving a cup of cold water," and doing it unto "one of the least of these" in Jesus' name (Matthew 10:42; 25:40). As the believer presents his or her total personality for service to both God and humanity, the Holy Spirit considers both the natural abilities of the believer and the need for workers in the church and then gifts that believer.

A gift is a divine enabling of the believer for ministry beyond any natural talents he or she may possess. Often the Holy Spirit challenges the believer to a further study of the Bible and considerable personal preparation and training for the task(s) the Spirit has assigned. Paul gives a list of gifts in Corinthians 12 and Romans 12. Additional lists are found in Ephesians 4 and Peter 4. The lists provided by Paul are not intended to be exclusive or to rule out other ways that the Spirit may peculiarly equip persons for God's work in the church and through his church to the world.

Convincing Evidence. The convincing evidence of the Spirit-filled life is holiness. Holy or righteous living includes a faithful study of the teachings of Jesus and a continual effort to live out the implications of those teachings day by day. The believer is not so spiritually conceited as to think that he or she is a perfect human being. The Holy Spirit is the source of power for holy living (John 16:5–16; Philippians 2:12–13). Paul sets the pattern of the Spirit-filled life in bold relief as he contrasts it with the sinful life. You will want to read about the "fruit of the Spirit" and the "acts

of the sinful nature” as Paul compares them in Galatians 5:16–26. It should be noted, also, that the Pentecostal outpouring in Acts 2 was more mission-centered than person-centered. The purpose was empowerment for the divine mission. Church of God hymnist Charles W. Naylor expressed both the scriptural teaching and the experience of the Spirit-filled life:

*Spirit holy in me dwelling,
Ever work as Thou shalt choose;
All my ransomed powers and talents
For thy purpose thou shalt use.
O sweet is thy abiding!
O how tender is the love
Thou dost shed abroad within me
From the Father-heart above!
Thou hast cleansed me for thy temple,
Garnished with Thy graces rare;
All my soul Thou art enriching
By Thy fullness dwelling there.
In me now reveal Thy glory,
Let Thy might be ever shown;
Keep me from the world's defilement,
Sacred for Thyself alone.
Spirit holy, Spirit holy,
All my being now possess;
Lead me, rule me, work within me,
Through my life Thy will express.²*

The experience of the Spirit-filled life begins when the believer, the individual Christian, opens his or her life to the full work of God's Spirit in a conscious act of the will. From that point on, there is a growth in the Spirit, called by some "progressive sanctification," which produces an increasing awareness of oneness with God and effectiveness in Christian service.

Three Ways Speak of the Church of God

We have good reason to use the name Church of God. It is a biblical name. What better source is there from which to get a name for a group who worships God! The name *Church of God* is used to describe the body of Christ in 1 Corinthians 1:2; 10:32; 11:22; 15:9; 2 Corinthians 1:2; Galatians 1:13; and Timothy 3:5.

Many church groups use the name *Church of God*. Also, some independent congregations use some form of the name. It is appropriate for Christians to search the Scriptures and discover that descriptive title. The Church of God with North American offices in Anderson, Indiana, makes no claim to the exclusive use of the biblical name and is conscious that such use brings with it the responsibility, even the obligation, to worship, fellowship, and serve in ways that honor God and his church.

We do not consider ourselves to be another denomination, with a prescribed creed and an unbending organizational structure. Neither are we a sect with legalistic statements on, and enforcement of, lifestyles. We do not have any captivating commitment to a human personality.

1. The name *Church of God* is used in a *universal* sense to refer to all persons who believe on Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord and are thereby in the Church by God's action as indicated in Acts 2:47. The Church of God is not a particular set of believers so much as it is all believers, whatever other associations to which they may give themselves in the name of Christ. The universal nature of the Church is marvelously communicated by Paul to the Ephesian Christians (Ephesians 2:1–22). His summary is descriptive and explanatory:

You are...fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.—Ephesians 2:19–22, NIV

2. The name *Church of God* is used to identify a particular movement within Protestant Christianity. When the name is used to designate the movement, it is written thus: Church of God (Anderson, Indiana). Since the time of its earliest spokesman, Daniel S. Warner, in the 1880s, the preachers, teachers, poets, and other writers have given emphasis to the message of *unity and holiness*.

The message of unity is that all God's people are one (John 17) and are called to recognize that unity, to relate to each other as brothers and sisters in Christ, and to coordinate their efforts in mission to the world.

The message of holiness is expressed well by Arlo F. Newell. He says the holy life begins as *divine cleansing purges the attitudes and disposition of the believer until the image of Christ is reflected in him or her. All of our emotions are left fully intact but are cleansed and sensitized by the Holy Spirit. Nothing essentially human is removed in the sanctifying experience. One's ability to love, hate, laugh and cry are now freed from the curse of sin to be experienced rightly as God's child. The believer now demonstrates the graces of the sanctified life as spoken of in Galatians 5:22–23.*³

The life of holiness includes both personal piety and disciplined practical service within the church and to all peoples of the world (Galatians 6:7–10).

Dr. John W. V. Smith, the late Church of God historian who taught at Anderson School of Theology until his retirement in the 1980s, has caught the spirit of the Church of God in this statement:

*The Church of God reformation movement was more than a series of emphases, however. It was a crusade to open the door of all truth. Some of the specific content of this truth was lifted up and proclaimed, but the limits of truth were never defined. That was left open, for God was still at work among his people and who could say when the boundaries of his revelation had been reached?*⁴

3. The name *Church of God* is also used to identify congregations. A Church of God congregation is a local community embodiment of the universal church as well as the Church of God reformation movement (Anderson, Indiana). We believe very strongly that genuine Christians identify themselves with a local body of believers and worship, fellowship, and serve with other Christians. Participation in the local church is not an option for Christians; it is an integral part of their salvation experience. (See Acts 2:41–46; Ephesians 5:19–21; Hebrews 10:25; 1 John 3:11–15.)

Nearly all congregations (local churches) identify themselves with designations of location such as *Northside Church of God* or *West Fourth Street Church of God*. Some use the title *First Church of God*, but in those instances, they refer only to the fact that theirs was the first congregation of the Church of God in that city or community. *First* has no biblical or theological meaning.

Some congregations in recent years have wanted to express more visibly the openness of the Church of God to fellowship all believers in Christ. Thus a few congregations have used designations such as *Community Church*, *The People's Church*, or simply *Northside Church*. The

theology and practices of the Church of God are consistent with the community concept for the local church.

This Is How We View Membership

We like the way the Church of God identifies its members. No one person decides that another will or will not be admitted to membership in a local group. Neither congregations nor congregational leaders vote on who shall be received as members. The Church of God believes that when one accepts Jesus Christ as Savior, God places that person in the church (Acts 2:47; 1 Corinthians 12:18). Salvation is the criterion for membership in a congregation of the Church of God. The first preachers and lay workers of this reformation movement sang lustily about that type of membership:

*We reach our hands in fellowship
to every blood-washed one,
While love entwines about each heart
in which God's will is done.⁵*

We also like what the Church of God says about maintaining membership in the church. One maintains membership by participating in the worship services and fellowship of the congregation. Amazingly, in a culture that seems to thrive on lists and membership statements, the Church of God has effectively carried on an expanding ministry in about ninety countries and established strong congregations that are involved in both person-oriented spiritual ministries and community-oriented social ministries. We like that.

And so, if you go to a Church of God congregation in Detroit, Michigan, or in Jackson, Mississippi, or in Los Angeles, California, and say, "I'd like to join the church," do not be surprised if the pastor or some layperson says something like, "My friend, if you are a Christian, you are already a member of God's church, and that is good enough for us. We invite you to worship with us. We will help you get acquainted and find your place in the life and work of the congregation."

In some of our congregations, we refer to each other as "brothers" and "sisters" in the Lord. Other congregations encourage the use of first names. These are ways of expressing our commitment and love for each other, both as friends and as children of God. We think you will like that.

How Can a Person Join the Church of God?

1. If you are **not a Christian** (that is, not saved, not born anew, not a disciple of Jesus Christ), then you will want to confess your sins in prayer, ask God to forgive your sinful way of living, and invite Jesus Christ to come into your life as Savior and Lord. You may be able to do this alone, but many persons have found that the assistance of a thoughtful and mature Christian is helpful at this time (Matthew 11:28). When you accept Jesus Christ as Savior, you are born into the church. You are a new creation in Christ (John 3:1-7; 2 Corinthians 5:17). Through the cross you have become a member.

2. If you **are a Christian** (that is, saved, born anew, a disciple of Jesus Christ), then let the pastor and other persons in the congregation know you are a Christian and begin worshiping and working with them. Then say to family, friends, and acquaintances, "I am a member of the Church of God." Your witness at this point is important to you and to the church. Because of the cross, you are a member.

Practical Perspectives on Membership

a. A person who has been a member of a denomination may wish, for his or her own purposes, to bring a letter to the local Church of God pastor; however, you are not required to bring a letter. Your personal affirmation of faith, your participation, and your Christian character will

demonstrate that you are a part of the family of God.

b. A consistent demonstration of Christian character is appropriate before persons are recognized for responsible positions of leadership in the life of the local church.

c. There is room for differences of opinion in the fellowship. Perfect agreement on minute details of doctrine and practice is not required. An open mind and an open heart are characteristic of a vital group of Christians.

d. Congregations seek to carry on financial and property matters in a fashion consistent with common business practices and state laws. Therefore, each congregation defines voting membership in terms of age and gives indication of how long a person is expected to have been worshiping with the local group. Voting membership is identified to meet requirements of incorporation laws; among the requirements are a personal witness to a Christian experience and a lifestyle consistent with the teachings of the Church of God.

e. A person removes himself or herself from membership in the Church of God when he or she is no longer committed to Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord or when his or her lifestyle is inconsistent with the teachings of Jesus and other clear teachings of the New Testament. Most persons do not have to be told of this; it is obvious to both the individual and the congregation. Many congregations have adopted a discipline process to counsel persons whose lifestyle is in question.

f. We have not always succeeded in being as open to fellowship Christians from other traditions as we would like. We have sometimes failed by “preaching” more than we “practiced.” Still we are seeking the ideals expressed and have been blessed as many thousands of others have said, “That’s the way I see it, too.” We ask that you be patient with us in our failures and work with us as we all learn to accept persons on the basis of their faith in Jesus Christ.

The Bible Is Our Rule of Faith

The Church of God movement has maintained a sure belief that the Bible is the inspired Word of God. As noted preacher Raymond Jackson used to say, “I may jump all over the Bible, but I will not jump out of it.” We believe the Bible is the foundation for instruction in the Christian faith. Paul said, “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness” (2 Timothy 3:16, NIV).

The Bible is a moving chronicle. It tells the story of Jesus—“the greatest story ever told.” It tells of men and women who found life at its highest and also experienced life at its most dreadful depths—persons such as Jonah, Job, Esther, Joseph, Moses, Ruth, and Matthew.

The stories and teachings of the Bible are not to be creedalized. We would not abbreviate the Bible and its teachings into a sixteen-sentence statement or expand it to a five-volume index of faith. We do appreciate short statements that are affirmations by a group or an individual. We can never suggest, however, that those statements adequately summarize the Bible. Nor are such statements wisely used as a basis to determine orthodoxy or membership in the church. Though we are tempted to make the Bible a list, a prescription, or a proposition, we remind ourselves that it is instead the Book of Life that vibrates with the stories of real persons and the living God.

There is probably only one major rule for the use of the Bible: Read it! We honor the Bible by accepting the fact that Christ is Savior and by worshiping him as Lord of life. He is the Living Word to whom the Bible, the written Word, witnesses (John 1:1–18). As Barry L. Callen has written, the Bible is for us

equated with the viewpoint of God. Thus for us the Bible must be accepted as a

*sure guide for the enlightenment of our faith and for the ordering of our steps.
When God speaks, all else must fall silent so that we can listen with our lives!*⁶

Church of God congregations have sung with great conviction:

*Praise God for His grace
which its pages unfold!
For the story of love
which will never grow old!
For the light on life's pathway
which streams from its pages!
Praise God for His Word,
blessed Book of the Ages!*⁷

Ordinances Are Rich Experiences for Believers

Ordinances are worship and faith disciplines which have specifically been ordained by Jesus in his instructions to his followers. We believe the ordinances are symbolic of something that is happening in the believer as a direct act of God's Spirit. The symbolic act witnesses to an inner reality. These symbols affirm and remind us of what God has done in Christ.

Baptism by immersion is a first step for the new believer. The term *baptism* means to immerse. Immersion of believers is the only form of baptism that is indicated in the New Testament. Through baptism, the new believer witnesses to a new spiritual dimension in his or her life. Baptism is also a witness to the church that the new believer is a part of its fellowship and work and to family and friends that he or she is now an active participant in the Christian community (Mark 1; Matthew 28; Acts 2:38).

The Lord's Supper, often called Communion, is an affirmation of oneness in Christ. In the sacramental churches, it is often called the *Eucharist* ("thanksgiving"), a reference to the thanks offered over the bread and the cup (1 Corinthians 10:16). The *Lord's Supper* and *Communion* are both terms used by Paul in his writings (1 Corinthians 11:20; 1 Corinthians 10:16, KJV). Church of God congregations frequently share the elements of the Lord's Supper. Many have Communion on the first Sunday of each month (including World Communion Sunday), on New Year's Eve, and on Maundy Thursday. The bread and the cup are symbolic of the grace experienced in the life of the believer.

Foot washing is an ordinance practiced by many church groups. It is an act symbolizing the servant ministry of all Christians to each other and to the world. Usually men assemble in one room and women in another. In some congregations, young persons assemble separately so they can be instructed more fully on the meaning and practice of foot washing. Some congregations now provide opportunity for family groups to participate in the ordinance of foot washing. Persons wash each other's feet, sing hymns, and give personal testimonies of God's blessing on their lives. Participation is not considered a test of faith. Rather, it is a spiritual experience which Christians are encouraged to observe and join.

Infant dedication is not considered an ordinance, but it is consistent with the instructions of Jesus. He said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these" (Matthew 19:14, NIV). Parents are encouraged to present themselves with their infants for a time of dedication in public worship, the act reminiscent of the presentation of Samuel by his mother as told in the Old Testament and Jesus by his parents as told in the New Testament. It is a time for the church and the parents to acknowledge the child as a gift from God, commit themselves to rear the child in awe and respect of God, and ask God's blessings upon the body, mind, and spirit of the child.

Infant baptism is not practiced in the Church of God. Infant baptism is usually an act on the part of parents by which they believe saving grace is imparted by God to the child. Later in life, the child is asked to confirm that decision by the parents after receiving instruction in the faith.

We believe a child is innocent and already in the grace of God. Later the child, in some stage of his or her growth and training, will come to a time when he or she responds to the conviction and leadership of the Holy Spirit and will have an opportunity to accept Christ as Savior. It is at that time the child, youth, or adult will be baptized.

We believe a *wedding* is a worship service of the church. A marriage should be entered into with discretion, wisdom, and recognition that it is a marvelous gift from God to both the couple and the families involved. We believe a marriage begins best with a wedding that is a worship experience and with both parties committed to Jesus Christ as Lord of their lives and home.