

THE ASSEMBLIES OF GOD POSITIONAL PAPERS



THE WHOLE ENGHILADA



WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY FIRST EDITION VER 26 David Hobrath

The R.U.S.H. Bible Study
David Hobrath

TABLE OF CONTENTS

4.	ABSTINANCE FROM ALCOHOL (2016)
26.	ASSURANCE OF SALVATION (2017)
35.	BAPTISM OF THE HOLY SPIRIT (2010)
54.	CHRISTIANS AND CITIZENSHIP (2025)
64.	DOCTRINE OF CREATION (2014)
71.	CHURCH MISSION AND PEACEKEEPING (2015)
81.	DIVINE HEALING (2010)
90.	DIVORCE AND REMARRIAGE (2024)
99.	DOMESTIC VIOLENCE (2022)
105.	FINAL JUDGEMENT (2024)
115.	GAMBLING (2015)
125.	HOMOSEXUALITY, MARRIAGE AND SEXUAL IDENTITY (2014)
137.	INERRANCY, INSPIRATION AND AUTHORITY OF SCRIPTURE (2015)
147.	THE KINGDOM OF GOD (2010)
155.	LEADERSHIP AND GOVERNANCE IN THE LOCAL CHURCH (2019)
171.	MISUSE OF SPIRITUAL LEADERSHIP (2025)
183.	MODERN DAY APOSTLES (2025)
192.	MODERN DAY PROPHECY (2025)
199.	A BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE ON ORDINATION: THE RECOGNITION OF A CALL TO MINISTRY (2025)
213.	PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES IN THE MINISTRY OF THE CHURCH (2024)
224.	PREMILLENNIAL ESCHATOLOGY (2024)
233.	A BIBLICALLY INFORMED RESPONSE TO THE SIN OF RACISM (2023)
241.	THE RAPTURE OF THE CHURCH (1979)
246.	A RESPONSE TO REFORMED THEOLOGY (2015)
255.	REVIVAL AND SPIRITUAL RENEWAL (2024)
265.	THE SANCTITY OF HUMAN LIFE: ABORTION AND REPRODUCTIVE (2010)
275.	THE SANCTITY OF HUMAN LIFE: SUICIDE AND EUTHANASIA (2010)
283.	SPIRITUAL WARFARE AND THE BELIEVER (2019)
293.	TRANSGENDERISM, TRANSEXUALITY AND GENDER IDENTITY (2017)
310.	WOMEN IN MINISTERIAL LEADERSHIP (2025)
322.	WORSHIP IN THE BIBLE (2008)

POSITION PAPER ON ABSTINENCE FROM ALCOHOL

(Adopted by the General Presbytery in session August 2-3, 2016)

From its inception, the Assemblies of God has been unequivocally committed to abstinence from alcoholic beverages, a conviction firmly rooted in what the Bible teaches about the abuse of wine, the consumption of strong drink, and also in its cardinal ethical principle of love for God and others. Not to be overlooked as well has been the obvious and well-publicized devastation resulting from alcohol abuse in so many homes and communities. Throughout our history, the proclamation of the gospel has been a powerful force in bringing addicted persons to dynamic faith in Christ, delivering them, enabling lifelong abstinence, and enhancing healthy homes, churches, and communities.

Unfortunately, one hundred years after the founding of our Fellowship, consumption of alcoholic beverages has become even more pervasive. In large part, this has been the result of a massive, multibillion-dollar, annual advertising campaign by the alcohol industry over the last several generations touting the pleasures and benefits of drinking. The entertainment media have also played a major role in the transformation of public attitudes by frequent and sophisticated portrayals of social drinking in movies, television, and other media.

Certain widely published studies (now increasingly challenged) have added apparent legitimacy to drinking by seeming to prove that there are medicinal benefits to moderate drinking. Wine especially is promoted as a heart-healthy beverage. The public may well infer that it is not only acceptable to consume alcohol, but also right and good to drink moderately to promote good health.

Over the passage of time, the church world has been greatly affected by these pervasive cultural influences. Regular activities attended by Christian believers—sports

events, office parties, social gatherings, business contacts, wedding receptions, and so forth— often expose them to alcohol.

As the pressures to participate in moderate consumption of wine and other alcoholic beverages mount, it is imperative that the long-standing Assemblies of God position on abstinence be reaffirmed in light of both the Scriptures and societal practice in order to faithfully witness to each generation and to continue to confront unjust and destructive social ills that harm people whom God loves. By any measure, the use and abuse of alcohol continues to take an enormous toll on people, and entire societies, around the world.

Modern Alcoholic Beverages Are More Intoxicating

Since appeals to approve moderate drinking are often based on wine use in the Bible, it is critically important to understand the differences between the production and use of wine in biblical times, and the more deceptive and dangerous use of alcoholic beverages today. Any study of the use of alcoholic drinks in the Bible must recognize that there is little direct correspondence with today's alcoholic beverages. There are several major differences:

1. Wine of the biblical era generally had lower alcohol content,
2. Ancient wine was commonly diluted before consumption,
3. Grapes were a staple of ancient agrarian life and commerce requiring preservation of the juice, and
4. The distillation process for liquors had not yet been fully developed.

Wines in biblical times variously are estimated to have been from 7–10 percent alcohol.¹ By contrast, modern breweries and distilleries produce table wines, fortified wines, and hard liquors that often have 14 percent, 18–24 percent, and 40–50 percent respectively. Distillation, that now produces alcoholic beverages with an alcohol content of 40 percent or more, was not invented until the Middle Ages. Thus, hard liquor as it is known and consumed today was unknown in biblical times.

Both ancient Greeks and Jews wrote of diluting wine to avoid intoxication. Drinking “unmixed” wine was considered barbaric in Greek culture. Ratios of 20:1 in Homer’s *Odyssey* and 8:1 in Pliny’s *Natural History* were probably not the norm but a mixture of 2:1 or 3:1 was common.² The Mishnah component of the Talmud gives the ratio of dilution as 3:1.³ Several of the Early Church fathers and the Bible itself allude to the practice of diluting wine.⁴ With a typical dilution ratio of 3:1, wine in biblical times would have ranged between 2–2.75 percent alcohol. By today’s legal standards, a drink has to be 3.2 percent alcohol before it is classified as an alcoholic beverage. Clearly, the wine consumed in Bible times lacked the potency of modern alcoholic beverages. Neither biblical nor historical references to mixed or diluted wine prove that everyone always diluted their wine, but the references do show it was a common practice.

Medical science was in its infancy and wine with its mild alcoholic content had numerous medicinal applications. For example, in the Parable of the Good Samaritan, the wounded traveler was treated by “pouring on oil and wine” (Luke 10:34).⁵ The healing and antiseptic properties of wine are probably reflected in Paul’s admonitions to Timothy to “Stop drinking only water, and use a little wine [oinos] because of your stomach and your frequent illnesses” (1 Timothy 5:23).

Grapes and the wine they yielded were basic staples of ancient agrarian life providing food, safer and more palatable beverages, and an important source of income. They were virtually a necessity of ancient life. By comparison, alcoholic beverages today are an optional recreational beverage, by no means a necessity, and, unfortunately, are far more potent and addictive. It is historically and hermeneutically misleading to suggest that the wine usage of Bible times justifies today’s consumption of far more powerful intoxicants.

Other Hermeneutical Considerations

Since the Scriptures are not always specific in responding to modern questions, it is not surprising that sincere inquirers come to conflicting conclusions. Fundamental rules for

interpreting what the Bible says involve asking basic questions: What did the biblical author intend to say to his readers? What did the first readers understand the author to be saying? What does the modern reader of the Bible hear in our current context and how are the scriptural themes and principles to be applied today?

There are at least three possible scenarios that help define the connection between biblical cultures and our own with reference to rules which govern behavior. First, when a question clearly relates to fundamental and timeless issues, the biblical response can be very explicit. For example, the Bible absolutely prohibits adultery: “You shall not commit adultery” (Exodus 20:14). The task of understanding this biblical rule for extramarital sex in nonbiblical times and cultures is not difficult. In other words, when a modern question is also an ancient question with which the Bible deals directly, the applicability of the answer is easiest.

Second, when an issue relates to a relatively new question, it may be a greater challenge to find biblical references as authoritative for establishing modern regulations. For example, smoking cigarettes has been regarded traditionally among Pentecostals as a sinful practice. In the absence of direct biblical prohibitions, the argument against tobacco was usually based on related themes such as the body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, or addictions are fleshly desires to be overcome, or freedom in Christ means deliverance from bad habits. Any or all of these arguments may be valid but there is not a clear biblical rule that says, “Do not smoke.” When a question is raised about a practice which is not specifically addressed in the Scriptures, guidance may be found in general themes or principles supported in the Bible. Ironically, contemporary culture, generally citing health concerns, has largely rejected the use of tobacco while usually ignoring the dangers of alcohol consumption.

Third, an even more complex situation emerges when guidance is sought about a practice that the Bible addresses in many references but does not offer a clear moral precept or directive. Thus the Bible has scores of references to wine and other alcoholic beverages, some of which seem to approve while others appear to disapprove.

Conflicting positions develop when the parties who ask the modern question select topical biblical information that may appear to support their predispositions, and then subjectively conclude their point of view is the biblical answer and therefore a universal guide for practice. Unfortunately, principles of biblical exegesis and hermeneutics are sometimes set aside because of strongly held presuppositions. In the face of conflicting conclusions based on the biblical texts, it becomes necessary to refer to more general biblical principles and values for guidance.

Biblical Languages Issues

Since generally we use English translations of the Bible, it is important to examine the pertinent original Hebrew and Greek words to better understand the nature and use of wine and other alcoholic beverages in biblical times.

In the Old Testament, eleven different Hebrew words are translated “wine.” Seven of them are used only once, and two are used about five times each. The two most common Hebrew words are *yayin* (141 times) and *tirosh* (38 times). The Hebrew lexicons⁶ describe *yayin* as a common drink for refreshment. It usually denotes fermented wine and is often associated with intoxication. *Yayin* was forbidden for Nazirites (Numbers 6:2–4) and for priests while serving in the tabernacle (Leviticus 10:9). While *yayin* was at times used in celebrations, the Bible also warns of its consequences.

Tirosh is defined as “fresh or new wine, must,⁷ grape juice” and most modern translations usually render it as “new wine” (NIV, NASB, NET, as well as KJV). Of the thirty-eight times the word is used, twenty are used in connection with grain and oil, indicating fruitfulness, productivity, and blessing (Proverbs 3:10; Isaiah 65:8; Joel 2:24). Though *tirosh* in a few cases may indicate the fermented wine that eventuates from fresh grape juice, the word is not associated with drunkenness (with the possible exception in Hosea 4:11 where *yayin* is paired with *tirosh*). For both *yayin* and *tirosh*, context determines whether the drink is fermented or not.

A third Hebrew word the Bible uses to refer to an alcoholic beverage is *shekar* (22 times). Though *shekar* can be translated “wine,” it is usually translated “strong drink” or “beer.” *Shekar* can refer to any alcoholic beverage made from grain or fruit. It is commonly paired with *yayin* and is an intoxicating drink, strong in both alcohol content and taste. Drinking *shekar* is almost always condemned in Scripture, except when used for relief from pain in the case of terminal illness (Proverbs 31:6). Those supporting drinking alcoholic beverages in moderation suggest Deuteronomy 14:26 is an apparent positive reference to consuming strong drink (*shekar*). The passage is in connection with tithes delayed until the festal visit to the tabernacle. In such a case, Israelites were permitted to exchange their tithe for silver to facilitate travel and then purchase “wine” (*yayin*) and “fermented drink” (*shekar*) for their feasts at the sites; however, the weight of Scripture suggests the strong drink in this instance would be poured out as a drink offering and not consumed as described in Numbers 28:7.⁸

The primary Greek word translated “wine” in the New Testament is *oinos* (34 times). The Septuagint (the pre-Christian Greek Old Testament) uses *oinos* to translate both *yayin* (fermented wine) and *tiros* (unfermented grape juice). Therefore, the context of the various Septuagint passages determines whether *oinos* should be interpreted as fermented or unfermented wine. Unfermented grape juice or juice in the early stages of fermentation is identified in the Gospels as “new wine” (*oinos neos*) (Matthew 9:17; Mark 2:22; Luke 5:37).⁹ *Gleukos*, used once (Acts 2:13), refers to “a new sweet wine in process of fermentation.”¹⁰ *Sikera*, also used once (Luke 1:15), is “an intoxicating drink made from grain.”¹¹ *Oxos*, translated as “sour wine” or “wine vinegar” is found six times in the crucifixion accounts.¹²

Representative Scripture Passages

Though it is not possible here to explore all two hundred-plus references to wine or strong drink, a few representative passages will give us a sense of the Scripture’s teaching.

Old Testament

Wine often is portrayed favorably as in verses such as Psalm 104:14–15: “He makes grass grow for the cattle, and plants for people to cultivate—bringing forth food from the earth: wine [*yayin*] that gladdens human hearts, oil to make their faces shine, and bread that sustains their hearts.” This theme is also found elsewhere, e.g., “May God give you heaven’s dew and earth’s richness—an abundance of grain and new wine [*tirosh*]” (Genesis 27:28). Also, “Honor the LORD with your wealth, with the firstfruits of all your crops; then your barns will be filled to overflowing, and your vats will brim over with new wine [*tirosh*]” (Proverbs 3:9–10). Wine, along with other natural provisions, was evidence of God’s blessing and favor. In this context “wine that gladdens human hearts” reflects the joy accompanying a successful harvest, not the inebriating effect of alcohol, as evidenced by the similar expressions about oil and bread—the context is food, not an inebriating beverage.

But the Old Testament also shows that these alcoholic drinks can be devastating in effect. Wine tends to alter one’s good judgment. “Wine [*yayin*] is a mocker and beer [*shekar*] a brawler; whoever is led astray by them is not wise” (Proverbs 20:1). Similarly, “It is not for kings... to drink wine [*yayin*], not for rulers to crave beer [*skehar*], lest they drink and forget what has been decreed, and deprive all the oppressed of their rights. Let beer be for those who are perishing, wine for those who are in anguish! Let them drink and forget their poverty and remember their misery no more” (Proverbs 31:4–7). In this text, rulers are to avoid strong drink and, by inference, the judgment-altering effects would be applicable to everyone. The verses also remind us that others are often harmed by one’s drinking.

Imbibing can indeed have tragic consequences. “Who has woe? Who has sorrow? Who has strife? Who has complaints? Who has needless bruises? Who has bloodshot eyes? Those who linger over wine [*yayin*], who go to sample bowls of mixed wine. Do not gaze at wine [*yayin*] when it is red, when it sparkles in the cup, when it goes down smoothly! In the end it bites like a snake and poisons like a viper” (Proverbs 23:29–32).

Intoxicating drink is definitely in view, and upon providing a detailed description of an alcoholic beverage, the writer does not suggest that it should be consumed in moderation.

New Testament

As noted above, wine is mentioned much less frequently in the New Testament than in the Old. In the Gospels, the word *oinos* is found twenty-one times but concentrated in only thirteen verses, most being parallel sayings in two, sometimes three, of the Gospels. These passages reflect the viticulture and wine consumption of first-century societies which had little change since Old Testament times. Typically, they describe such actions as John the Baptist's abstinence from wine (Luke 1:15; 7:33), Jesus' refusal from the cross of wine mixed with gall/myrrh (Matthew 27:34; Mark 15:23), the antiseptic use mentioned in the Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:34), and Jesus' apparently oft-repeated saying about new wine bursting old wineskins (Matthew 9:17; Mark 2:22; Luke 5:37–38), undoubtedly a truism of wine production and storage at the time. The overall impression is that of a largely agrarian society utilizing the products of the vineyard that played such a key role in life and commerce. And, as often documented in the writings of that era, the wine as usually consumed was commonly diluted by several parts.

Almost a third of the occurrences of *oinos* are concentrated in the record of the miracle at Cana where Jesus turned the water into wine (six times in John 2:3, 9, 10; 4:46). This miracle, the first “sign” in John’s Gospel, lay in that Jesus instantaneously turned demonstrably potable water into large quantities of what was judged by the unknowing master of the wedding feast to be the “best” (*kalos*) wine. The text is silent on the meaning of *oinos* in the John 2 passage. We believe the larger contextual interpretation is that Jesus would not have made a product that would be detrimental to the wedding guests.

The Last Supper narratives (Matthew 26:17–30; Mark 14:12–26; Luke 22:7–38; John 13) are also considered to be important texts in the study of wine use in the Gospels.

Like other observant Jews, Jesus participated in drinking from the cup passed at those traditional Passover celebrations. Note Mark's description of the event, "Then he [Jesus] took a cup, and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them, and they all drank from it" (Mark 14:23). After this Jesus said, "Truly I tell you, I will not drink again from the fruit of the vine [tou genēmatos tēs ampelou] until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God" (Mark 14:25). In this instance, rather than the usual term for wine (*oinos*), the phrase "fruit of the vine" is consistent with the prohibition against yeast or fermentation during the Passover week (Exodus 12:15, 19–20; 13:7).

All the Gospel references to wine are historical accounts of events or sayings the writers were inspired to include in their writings. While the Gospels reflect practices of the period, there are no commands from Jesus that teach His followers to drink wine (unless His instructions to repeat the Last Supper are taken as such [Luke 22:17–20; 1 Corinthians 11:25–26]).

Surprisingly, there are very few references to wine in the New Testament epistles. *Oinos* is found only five times in the Pauline and General Epistles (Romans 14:21; Ephesians 5:18; 1 Timothy 3:8; 5:23; Titus 2:3), to be followed by eight occurrences in Revelation (6:6; 14:8, 10; 16:19; 17:2; 18:3, 13; 19:15). Only one of these thirteen references affirms the use of wine, Paul's directive to Timothy to "Stop drinking only water, and use a little wine because of your stomach and your frequent illnesses" (1 Timothy 5:23). In this case *oinos* is urged only for medicinal use since Timothy clearly has been abstaining from *oinos* and drinking only water (probably impure). All other references in the Epistles are cautionary, as in Paul's imperative to the Ephesians, "Do not get drunk [methuskomai] on wine, which leads to debauchery" (5:18a). What is startling in the Revelation is that, other than two neutral references to wine as vintage (6:6) or cargo (18:13), wine is used metaphorically for either human sin or God's final eschatological wrath.

What is also striking is the semantic range of the terms used throughout the New Testament to express the risks and abuse of wine. There are eight different words

having to do with “drunkenness” found a total of twenty times in the New Testament,¹³ sometimes immediately joined with *oinos* as its correlate (as in Ephesians 5:18) but often standing separately to denote the shameful behavioral condition attributable to abuse of wine. Thus Jesus warned, “Be careful, or your hearts will be weighed down with carousing, drunkenness [*methē*] and the anxieties of life” (Luke 21:34). Paul cautioned that neither “thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards [*methusos*] nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God” (1 Corinthians 6:10). Peter dramatically expressed his concern in the General Epistles, “For you have spent enough time in the past doing what pagans choose to do—living in debauchery, lust, drunkenness [*oinophlygia*], orgies, carousing and detestable idolatry (1 Peter 4:3). Certainly, neither Jesus nor the apostles assumed that all people fell into these categories but then, as now, alcohol abuse was a scourge that Christians must avoid and seek to alleviate.

Acts and the New Testament Epistles offer little insight into the use of wine in the early churches but do express a great deal of reserve about its potential for abuse. Paul severely chastised some of the Corinthian believers who were getting drunk at their love feasts where the Lord’s Supper was observed (1 Corinthians 11:20–21). In the Ephesians letter, he also pointedly charged, “Do not get drunk on wine [*oinos*], which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit” (5:18).

Some have thought Paul’s previously noted admonition to Timothy, “Stop drinking only water, and use a little wine [*oinos*] because of your stomach and your frequent illnesses” (1 Timothy 5:23), to be approval of moderate drinking. However, Paul’s counsel was instead, as noted, a recommendation for medicinal use. Timothy was probably drinking only local water or other nonalcoholic liquids (likely impure). That he needed to be encouraged to take a little wine for his stomach’s sake certainly indicates that regular use of wine was not his lifestyle.

Some Basic Conclusions

The historic commitment of the Assemblies of God to abstinence is well founded, biblically and ethically. This paper has demonstrated the Scriptures overwhelming negative view of what the text clearly defines as a beverage with high alcohol content. The strongest drink possible in biblical times was not a modern fortified wine with 14–20 percent alcohol content, much less bourbon or tequila at 40–50 percent alcohol content, but naturally fermented wine or beer with a maximum possible alcohol content of 10–11 percent. A beverage with high alcohol content was identified by the Hebrew word *shekar* meaning strong drink. The Hebrew word for wine (*yayin*) could also be used to identify such a beverage when paired with *shekar* or when alcohol content is clearly in view (Proverbs 20:1; 23:29–33; 31:4–7). Scriptural warnings could be carefully observed through the common process of diluting fermented wine, which could produce a beverage that would have been categorized as subalcoholic by today's standards. It is critical to note that the weakest wine or liquor available today has more alcohol content than the “strong drink” of biblical times; therefore, a strong biblical case can be made against even the moderate consumption of modern alcoholic beverages.

As all agree, drunkenness is always condemned in the Scriptures. Biblical stories of Noah and his sons (Genesis 9:20–27) and Lot and his daughters (Genesis 19:30–38) vividly show that intoxication often leads to tragic ends. God pronounces woe to those who run after their strong drink and are inflamed by wine (Isaiah 5:11,22). Drunkenness is listed by the apostle Paul among the “acts of the flesh,” and he declares that drunkenness will keep one from inheriting the kingdom of God (Galatians 5:19–21; 1 Corinthians 6:9–10). He reminds the Corinthian believers that some of them were drunkards before they were washed and justified by Christ, implying that such behavior is to cease after salvation (1 Corinthians 6:11). The apostle Peter contrasts living the new life in Christ with running with former companions in drunken “wild living” (1 Peter 4:3–4). Drunkenness never has God's approval and it is always a potential outcome of alcohol consumption.

There are specific dangers inherent in alcohol, against which the Bible gives clear warning. Alcohol tends to alter one's judgment (Proverbs 31:4–5), frequently brings woe, sorrow, and strife (Proverbs 23:29), and can cause physical harm (Proverbs 23:29,35). It can lower one's inhibitions, leading to shameful behavior, loose speech, promiscuity, and violence (Proverbs 20:1; Isaiah 5:11; Romans 13:13). Alcohol is a mocker, a deceiver that leads people astray. "It goes down smoothly," but "in the end it bites like a snake and poisons like a viper" (Proverbs 23:31–32). So deceptive is it that one tends at first not to realize the harm it is doing (Proverbs 23:35).

While the Scriptures approvingly recount the stories of different individuals and groups who abstain from alcohol, they especially set a high standard for spiritual leaders (Judges 13; Jeremiah 35). The clear prohibition of Old Testament priests drinking wine while serving in the tabernacle/temple (Leviticus 10:8–9), the vow of the Nazirite not to drink wine (Judges 13), the tradition of the Rekabites (Jeremiah 35), the examples of John the Baptist and Timothy—all have deep spiritual significance for today's Christian leaders.

Abstinence is relevant to the whole priesthood of believers; those involved in the holy calling of ministry bear a special responsibility of example. In instructing his coworkers Timothy and Titus on the appointment of elders, Paul emphasized to both that Christian leaders are "not [to be] given to drunkenness" (1 Timothy 3:3; Titus 1:7). The Greek noun Paul used is *paroinos* which denotes "one who is given to drinking too much wine," hence "addicted to wine" or "drunkard."¹⁴ Obviously, this is an area in which the Christian leader must exercise great discipline, setting a good example for all believers to follow and nonbelievers to respect.

Moderation: An Elusive Standard

Moderation is often recommended as an appropriate and desirable contemporary response to the biblical portrayal of wine consumption. However, the New Testament does not advocate moderate drinking. Nor does it explain how one is to know when moderation is being practiced. There is no universal definition of moderation and thus

the term is highly subjective. What one person considers moderate, another may view as heavy drinking. To illustrate the uncertainty, one commonly accepted research definition of moderate drinking describes it as up to twelve to fourteen drinks per week for men (nine for women), and includes a blood alcohol concentration up to .055.¹⁵

Even with a well-intentioned and more disciplined practice of moderation, each user responds differently to alcohol. Though the legal limit for drunkenness is a blood alcohol concentration (BAC) of 0.08, various aspects of impairment may be present with a BAC as low as 0.02.¹⁶ Alcohol may be the socially acceptable drink of choice, but it is also the most addictive. The Navy and Marine Corps Public Health Center points out, “Alcoholism is not defined by what you drink, when you drink it, or even how much you drink. It’s the effects of your drinking that define a problem.”¹⁷ One person may use alcohol many times with seemingly no ill effects; another may overdose or become addicted after only a few drinks.

One should also keep in mind the genetic propensity toward alcoholism that some seem to inherit. The National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA) advises that while various factors come into play “genes are responsible for about half of the risk for alcoholism.”¹⁸ The moderate drinker is naïve not to recognize the peril of addiction for themselves or those they influence. No one sets out to be an alcoholic. But with no reliable definition of moderation in Scripture or elsewhere, or with uncertain knowledge of one’s tolerance for alcohol, one may easily move from being a moderate to excessive drinker. Reportedly, 51 percent of American adults drink regularly¹⁹ and more than thirtyeight million binge drink about four times a month²⁰ (not counting the rapidly growing population of underage drinkers). Few if any set out to be problem drinkers but alcohol consumption can indeed be a slippery slope.

Christian Liberty and “Moderation”

Those who champion moderation often do so in the name of Christian liberty. However, the apostle Paul twice reminds us that though all things may be permissible to us, not everything is beneficial or constructive (1 Corinthians 6:12; 10:23). Our choice of an

action is not to be based simply on its being allowed, but on whether it edifies (1 Thessalonians 5:11). Some Corinthian believers thought they were spiritual because of knowledge they claimed to have and thought all believers should have as the basis for Christian behavior. They thought such knowledge “builds up.” Instead Paul told them that sometimes knowledge “puffs up” and destroys others. Rather than being spiritual, it leads to sinful pride. The Christian ethic of love always “builds up”—seeks the advantage of another (1 Corinthians 8:1–11; Philippians 2:1–5). However, in doing so the one who loves is also built up. True Christian liberty knows the joy to “honor one another above yourselves” (Romans 12:10). Christian liberty is the freedom to do the good thing and demonstrate spiritual maturity.

Love for Family

Love undergirds and energizes family life. Christ’s self-sacrificing love sets the tone for Spirit-filled living as Paul counsels family heads on the application of that love to their extended families (Ephesians 5:18 to 6:9). In a later text, he added that believers are to “learn first of all to put their religion into practice by caring for their own family” (1 Timothy 5:4).

Children, especially, who often experience peer pressure to experiment with alcohol beginning in their preteens, need the loving counterinfluence of parents, “the number one influence on their decisions about alcohol.”²¹ Reportedly, “In homes where the parents were social drinkers, 66 percent of the children experimented with alcohol before adulthood.”²² In families where parents are alcoholics, children are far more likely to suffer abuse and are themselves four times more likely to become alcoholics.²³ Moreover, studies report that one in four children who began using any addictive substance, including alcohol, before age eighteen become addicted.²⁴ Children are far more likely to follow our example than merely our advice about alcohol.

Love for Christian Brothers and Sisters

“It is better not to eat meat or drink wine or to do anything else that will cause your brother or sister to fall” (Romans 14:21). In his letters to the Roman and Corinthian churches, the apostle Paul writes nearly three chapters to explain that even though believers may have a personal understanding of things permissible to God, they must not allow that understanding to cause other brothers or sisters to stumble and fall (Romans 14, 15; 1 Corinthians 8). The circumstances and issues of Paul’s day may differ somewhat from our own, but the principle of sacrificial loving concern for our brothers and sisters in Christ remains. There are many in our churches who are offended by moderate drinking, believing that drinking alcoholic beverages is a sin. Others may be endangered by following a respected believer’s example of moderation that unintentionally becomes harmful and destructive to them. Still others may be hurt because the practice of moderation may make their own struggle with alcohol more difficult. Love always trumps preference—for we are still our brother’s keeper.

Love for Church

“Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace” (Ephesians 4:3). From its beginning the Church placed a premium on unity (Acts 2). Some of the harshest words of Scripture are written concerning those who for their own desires stir up strife and cause divisions between believers (Romans 16:17–18). The apostle Paul, dealing with a contentious issue in the Corinthian church, acknowledged different viewpoints but pointed to the established tradition of the church on that particular point as their guide (1 Corinthians 11:16). In that same context, he severely rebuked the Corinthians for a contemptuous abuse of food and alcohol that marred their Lord’s Supper observances and led to the neglect and deprivation of fellow members (11:21).

The Church is about eternal issues. We are part of a church fellowship that has a century-old tradition of abstinence from alcohol that has been gleaned from the Scriptures and practical experience. We easily forget that innumerable converts among us have been dramatically delivered from alcoholism and its dreadful consequences for

themselves and their families. “Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and mutual edification” rather than disrupting the work of God for the sake of a personal preference (Romans 14:19–20).

Love for Society

The second commandment flowing directly from the first, to love God, is, “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Mark 12:31). Christ followers are to be “salt” and “light” in the world (Matthew 5:13–16). So God’s Word reminds us in many ways that we are also to work for a just and healthy society. Paul taught, “as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people” (Galatians 6:10). Peter added, “Live such good lives among the pagans [‘non-Christians,’ NET] that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us” (1 Peter 2:12). As accountable citizen-believers and agents of health and healing, we are responsible to critically evaluate the impact of alcohol use (and other potentially harmful practices) on our society.

Approximately seventeen million Americans have what the NIAA designates “an alcohol use disorder.”²⁵ The annual cost to American society of alcohol misuse problems was estimated at \$249 billion in 2010. Annually about eighty-eight thousand deaths are alcohol related.²⁶ About thirty people die daily because of an alcohol-impaired driver. This amounts to one death every forty-eight minutes.²⁷ Alcohol is a factor in 40 percent of the three million violent crimes which occur each year.²⁸

Alcohol is a pernicious danger to our children and a scourge on college and university campuses. Annually, it is estimated that 1,825 students ages eighteen to twenty-four die from alcohol-related unintentional injuries, including car crashes. Nearly seven hundred thousand students are assaulted by other students, including nearly one hundred thousand victims of alcohol-related sexual assault and date rape.²⁹ Suicide is the tenthleading cause of death in the United States (third-leading cause for ages fifteen to twenty-four) and one-third tested positive for alcohol.³⁰ Thirty-nine percent of high school

students drink regularly and an estimated 1 in 10 high school seniors are extreme binge drinkers. Alcohol abuse in the teen years may impair healthy brain development.³¹ And, not least, alcohol is now considered to be the gateway drug to tobacco, marijuana, and other licit and illicit drugs.³²

Love for Self

Jesus implicitly taught healthy self-regard when He said, “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 19:19). Consciously rejecting self-indulgent narcissism, believers are to nurture their own physical and spiritual lives in keeping with the teachings of Scripture. Our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit and instruments for doing God’s service (1 Corinthians 6:19; Romans 6:13).

Therefore, it is important to ask, “What are the effects of alcohol usage (and other lifestyle indulgences) for the believer’s personal health and Christian service?”

Consumption of alcoholic beverages is known to be associated with ailments including stroke, hypertension, heart disease, pancreatitis, liver disease, immune system disorders, and various cancers. Some optimistically believe that moderate drinkers will not experience adverse health effects from alcohol but cautions abound. For example, while recognizing limited benefits of moderate drinking, the Harvard School of Public Health also addresses the “dark side of alcohol” and states, “If you don’t drink, there’s no need to start. You can get similar benefits with exercise (beginning to exercise if you don’t already or boosting the intensity and duration of your activity) or healthier eating.”³³ The Mayo Clinic, also noting there may be limited benefits of moderate drinking, is similarly cautious: “Certainly, you don’t have to drink any alcohol, and if you currently don’t drink, don’t start drinking for the possible health benefits. In some cases, it’s safest to avoid alcohol entirely—the possible benefits don’t outweigh the risks.”³⁴

A more recent and unusually comprehensive international study of the effects of alcohol consumption on cardiovascular health co-led by the Perelman School of Medicine at the University of Pennsylvania challenges even the limited benefits of moderate consumption. One of the lead researchers reports, “Contrary to what earlier reports

have shown, it now appears that any exposure to alcohol has a negative impact upon heart health.”³⁵

To the physical risks are added mental and emotional concerns, especially depression. One who starts out drinking moderately never knows where alcohol may take them.

Abstinence and Spiritual Formation

There are specific, ethical principles of attitude and behavior throughout the Bible which should also guide our life choices, and which, we believe, should lead to abstinence. For Christians, the foundational ethical principle that pervades every step in our spiritual formation is love.

Given the wide-ranging implications of alcohol use and abuse today, there are few issues that loom larger in one's spiritual formation. The believer's commitment to either abstinence or moderation should not be based only upon the Scripture verses that deal with ancient wine use. Given the obvious and much publicized dangers of current alcohol consumption, as well as biblical cautions about the dangers of alcohol, Christian believers must carefully and prayerfully examine their own motives and attitudes. Does moderate drinking really contribute to the mature spirituality and engaging witness taught in the Scriptures? Does drinking enhance the believer's personal and private life? Is it worth the publicly acknowledged risks? Given the price of alcoholic beverages, is the expense a wise application of Christian stewardship?

An Affirmation of Abstinence

“Don't become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking” (Romans 12:2, The Message). To abstain means to voluntarily choose to avoid. It is a choice, not a commandment. The question we should ask ourselves is not “Can a Christian drink?” but “Should a Christian drink?”

Abstinence is the biblical choice. The Bible clearly warns of the perils of alcoholic beverages and negatively views the consumption of what the context clearly describes

as a beverage with high alcohol content. Failure to take seriously those warnings has resulted in untold heartache, misery, and ruin. Unnecessary self-indulgence for a fleeting pleasure may eventuate in unacceptable costs to the individual, the family, and the society at large. Moderation may seem a harmless, private indulgence, but may become a very public detrimental influence.

Abstinence is the wise choice. The tragic results of alcoholism will never come to the one who never takes the first drink. Where alcohol is avoided, drunken abuse will not pull a family apart. A church that teaches and practices abstinence should compassionately rescue those bound by alcohol, but also faithfully warn others of its subtle dangers. Prevention is always better than cure.

Abstinence is a moral choice. It glorifies God, protects the individual, honors fellow believers, preserves families, unifies the church, and blesses society. Abstinence reflects both the direct and indirect moral principles of the Word of God. Abstinence is not moral legalism but Christian discipleship, which inherently involves self-denial in following Christ. "The underlying sensibility is taking care of your neighbor, taking care of your family, trying to be a good role model, and not being a stumbling block."³⁶ Abstinence is not grounded in legalism, but in the highest moral attribute of love.

Therefore the Assemblies of God reaffirms its position of abstinence from alcoholic beverages. This position should be proclaimed boldly and clearly throughout our Fellowship, yet humbly and lovingly in faithful ministry to all.

Notes

1. As cited in R. Laird Harris, ed., *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* [TWOT] (2 vols.), (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), 1:376.
2. Robert Stein, "Wine-Drinking in New Testament Times," *Christianity Today*, June 10, 1975, 9–11. Stein references numerous sources from the Greco-Roman world that address specific ratios of mixing water and wine.
3. The Mishnah, Shabbath 77a; The Mishnah, Pesachim 1086.
4. James Donaldson, *Ante-Nicene Fathers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans), vol. 2.2.2; Cyprian, *Epistle*, LX11, 2, 22, 13; Justin Martyr, *Apology*, 1,67,5.

5. All biblical citations unless otherwise indicated are from the New International Version (2011).
6. Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs (eds.), *The New Brown, Driver, and Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Lafayette: APIA, 1981). R. Laird Harris (ed.), *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980).
7. “Must,” as cited here from the Hebrew lexicons above is defined as “the expressed juice of fruit and especially grapes before and during fermentation; also: the pulp and skins of the crushed grapes.” <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/must?show=0&t=1405971575> (accessed July 21, 2014).
8. The combination of these two Hebrew words indicate alcoholic beverages; however, the following factors contradict the assumption that the beverage in this context may be consumed: (1) this is the only instance out of twenty-three occurrences in the Old Testament in which the recreational consumption of strong drink (*shekar*) appears to be viewed favorably; (2) it contradicts those instances in which what is clearly alcoholic wine (*yayin*) is prohibited, such as Proverbs 23:29–33; (3) in Numbers 28:7 the strong drink was poured out as a drink offering and not consumed, which could have been the intended purpose here and understood by the Israelites in that time. The word translated “eat” in the passage is a general term for consumption and may or may not include the idea of drinking, which raises the question whether specific permission is being given to consume strong drink [See Richard Land and Barrett Duke, *The Christian and Alcohol Theological Review*, Spring 2008, p. 23]; and (4) it seems inconsistent on the one hand to prohibit priests from consuming alcoholic wine in a worship context (Leviticus 10:9) and on the other hand encourage the consumption of alcoholic beverages by worshipper and priest at the accompanying feast.
9. Some have argued that the *oinos* that flows from the burst wineskins denotes unfermented grape juice.
10. Johannes P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida (eds.), *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains*, 2nd ed. (New York: United Bible Societies, 1988–1989), 1:77. See also Frederick William Danker (ed.), *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. [BDAG]. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000); and Joseph Henry Thayer, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1974).
11. Louw and Nida, 1:77; Danker, BDAG, 923.
12. Louw and Nida, 1:78; Danker, BDAG, 715.
13. Louw and Nida, 1:773.
14. Danker, BDAG, 780.
15. Moderate Drinking,
http://moderatedrinking.com/home/default_home.aspx?p=md_defined (accessed May 14, 2014). See also <http://www.cdc.gov/vitalsigns/pdf/2014-01-vitalsigns.pdf> (accessed May 15, 2014).
16. <http://www.nhtsa.gov/links/sid/ABCsBACWeb/page2.htm> (accessed April 14, 2016).

17. "The Truth About Alcohol," Navy and Marine Corps Public Health Center (accessed April 29, 2014). <http://www.med.navy.mil/sites/nmcphc/health-promotion/Pages/ReproMaterial-The-Truth-AboutAlcohol.aspx>.
18. <http://www.niaaa.nih.gov/alcohol-health/overview-alcohol-consumption/alcohol-use-disorders/geneticsalcohol-use-disorders> (accessed May 16, 2014).
19. http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/series/sr_10/sr10_260.pdf (accessed May 15, 2014).
20. <http://www.cdc.gov/vitalsigns/pdf/2012-01-vitalsigns.pdf> (accessed May 15, 2014).
21. Jan Withers, quoted in Nanci Hellmich, "1 in 10 high school seniors are extreme binge drinking," USA Today, September 16, 2013, <http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2013/09/16/extreme-bingedrinking-seniors/2809739/>.
22. Richard Land, "The great alcohol debate," Baptist Press, July 24, 2006 (accessed April 17, 2014). <http://www.bpnews.net/bpnews.asp?ID=23678>.
23. American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry. http://www.aacap.org/AACAP/Families_and_Youth/Facts_for_Families/Facts_for_Families_Pages/Childre_n_Of_Alcoholics_17.aspx (accessed May 16, 2014).
24. "Adult Substance Use," The Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University (accessed April 17, 2014). <http://www.casacolumbia.org/addiction-prevention/adult-addiction>.
25. <http://www.niaaa.nih.gov/alcohol-health/overview-alcohol-consumption/alcohol-facts-and-statistics> (accessed May 16, 2014).
26. "Alcohol Facts and Statistics," National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (accessed June 30, 2016). <http://www.niaaa.nih.gov/alcohol-health/overview-alcohol-consumption/alcohol-facts-and-statistics>.
27. Centers for Disease Control. http://www.cdc.gov/MotorVehicleSafety/Impaired_Driving/impaireddrv_factsheet.html (accessed May 16, 2014).
28. National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence (NCADD). <http://www.ncadd.org/index.php/learn-about-alcohol/alcohol-and-crime> (accessed May 16, 2014).
29. Ibid.
30. "Suicide: Facts at a Glance: 2012," Center for Disease Control (accessed April 29, 2014). http://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/Suicide_DataSheet-a.pdf.
31. Megan Patrick, quoted in Nanci Hellmich, "1 in 10 high school seniors are extreme binge drinking," USA Today, September 16, 2013, <http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2013/09/16/extreme-bingedrinking-seniors/2809739/>. The article is Megan E. Patrick et al., "Extreme Binge Drinking Among 12thGrade Students in the United States: Prevalence and Predictors," JAMA Pediatrics 167, no. 11 (2013): 1019–1025, <http://archpedi.jamanetwork.com/article.aspx?articleid=1738765>.
32. National Center for Biotechnology Information. <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/22712674> (accessed May 16, 2014).

33. Harvard School of Public Health,
<http://www.hsph.harvard.edu/nutritionsource/alcohol-full-story/> (accessed May 16, 2014).
34. "Alcohol use: If you drink, keep it moderate," Mayo Clinic (accessed April 17, 2014). <http://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-living/nutrition-and-healthy-eating/in-depth/alcohol/art-20044551>.
35. <http://www.biospace.com/News/a-little-red-wine-does-not-benefit-the-heartafter/339581?intcid=homepage-seekercarousel-featurednews-navindex3> (accessed February 5, 2015).
36. Larry Eskridge, quoted in Kevin P. Emmert, "Relaxing Over Drinks," Christianity Today 57, no. 10 (December 2013), 22.

NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION® AND NIV® ARE REGISTERED TRADEMARKS OF BIBLICA, INC. USE OF EITHER TRADEMARK FOR THE OFFERING OF GOODS OR SERVICES REQUIRES THE PRIOR WRITTEN CONSENT OF BIBLICA US, INC.

SCRIPTURES MARKED NET ARE QUOTED BY PERMISSION AND ARE TAKEN FROM THE NET BIBLE® COPYRIGHT ©1996-2006 BY BIBLICAL STUDIES PRESS, L.L.C. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

SCRIPTURES MARKED THE MESSAGE ARE TAKEN FROM THE MESSAGE. COPYRIGHT © 1993, 1994, 1995, 1996, 2000, 2001, 2002. USED BY PERMISSION OF NAVPRESS PUBLISHING GROUP.

Download: [Abstinence from Alcohol \(PDF\)](#)

POSITION PAPER ON ASSURANCE OF SALVATION

(Adopted by the General Presbytery in Session August 5-7, 2017)

In view of the biblical teaching that the security of the believer depends on a living relationship with Christ (John 15:6); in view of the Bible's call to a life of holiness (Hebrews 12:14; 1 Peter 1:16); in view of the clear teaching that a man may have his part taken out of the Book of Life (Revelation 22:19); and in view of the fact that one who believes for a while can fall away (Luke 8:13); The General Council of the Assemblies of God disapproves of the unconditional security position which holds that it is impossible for a person once saved to be lost. (Bylaws, Article IX.B.1)

The Assemblies of God affirms the biblical teaching that people enter into a personal saving relationship with Christ through the regenerating power of the Holy Spirit, who draws them to repentance and faith in Christ. Jesus described this initial salvation experience as “new birth” (John 3:3–6),¹ as did the apostle Peter (1 Peter 1:3). Likewise, Paul wrote, “He saved us through the washing of rebirth [*palingenesias*, “rebirth” or “regeneration”] and renewal by the Holy Spirit” (Titus 3:5), also using “new creation” for this transformative saving event (2 Corinthians 5:17).

At the time of the believer's new birth, theologically designated “regeneration,” the Holy Spirit comes into them, bringing assurance of forgiveness of sins, spiritual renewal, and a personal relationship with God. “The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children” (Romans 8:16). This dynamic relationship with God by His Spirit, initiated and sustained through faith, undergirds the security of the believer.

The following biblical teachings sustain and guide the believer's growing maturity and perseverance in their relationship with Christ.

- Salvation is available for every person (Luke 19:10; John 3:16; Romans 10:11–13; Hebrews 2:9; 2 Peter 3:9; Revelation 22:17).

- Salvation is received and assured through faith (Romans 3:28; Galatians 2:20–21; Ephesians 2:8; Philippians 3:9; Hebrews 10:38; 1 Peter 1:5).
- Salvation is an ongoing conflict with temptation and sin (Romans 1:32; 1 Corinthians 3:1–3, 5–8; 5:9–13; Hebrews 3:12–14; 12:1; 1 John 1:8; 3:8).
- The believer's salvation may be forfeited or abandoned by willfully turning away from Christ (John 17:12; 1 Timothy 4:1; 5:12, 15; Hebrews 6:4–6, 10:26–27, 38; 2 Peter 2:20; 1 John 5:16).

I. God Makes Provision of Salvation for Every Person

God desires every person to be saved, a truth the Bible repeatedly sets out (Luke 19:10; John 3:16; Romans 10:11–13; Hebrews 2:9; 2 Peter 3:9; Revelation 22:17).

God's eternal saving purpose is expressed in Jesus' own words, "For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost" (Luke 19:10); that is, He desires to save all people. At the beginning of the Gospel of John, Jesus is presented as "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29). The Gospel's great theme follows, "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16).

The Pauline epistles likewise reiterate God's universal redemptive plan: "...God our Savior... wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth" (1 Timothy 2:3–4). "God... is the Savior of all people, and especially of those who believe" (1 Timothy 4:10). "For the grace of God has appeared that offers salvation to all people" (Titus 2:11). This is called prevenient grace, the grace God provides prior to salvation, drawing all people toward salvation and enabling them to either accept or reject His offer. After many such expressions of God's universal offer of salvation, the Bible fittingly concludes with a closing invitation to all humanity, "Let the one who is thirsty come; and let the one who wishes take the free gift of the water of life" (Revelation 22:17).

Unfortunately, some Christian traditions have come to a view of God's sovereignty that asserts that only a limited number of humans are able to respond to God's offer of salvation. Moreover, these traditions maintain that Christ's atoning sacrifice is not intended for all. They assume that God sovereignly decreed from eternity past to elect

only a limited number of persons to salvation. This belief is rooted in a number of biblical passages that do indeed emphasize God's sovereignty in His saving activity. For example, Jesus' words in the Gospel of John make it clear that the Father must act to draw humans into His electing purposes (6:37, 44, 65). Another commonly referenced text is Romans 9:11–18, that recounts God's foresight of the lives of Jacob and Esau, and points out God's sovereign election of Jacob rather than Esau. The biblical metaphor of the potter's sovereign control over the clay follows in this passage and is often cited in support of God's absolute sovereignty in effecting human salvation (9:20–21).

However, while these passages certainly teach that God is sovereign in all that He does, they are not a denial of human freedom in responding to the gospel. The election of Jacob over Esau entailed what God foreknew each of them would do. The sacred history in Genesis vividly recounts the story of Jacob's own personal decisions as he struggled with God and haltingly responded in faith. The pottery image is an eloquent and powerful depiction of God's sovereignty, but the potter's singular effort to create a quality vessel is by no means intended to teach that God deliberately passes over certain people, thereby leaving them to be eternally lost. Such passages as these do not contradict the "whoever believes" of John 3:16 and God's provision for all as so often expressed throughout the Bible.

The apostle Paul put God's saving purposes in divine perspective as he wrote, "For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters" (Romans 8:29). In this crucial passage, God is not shown to deny humanity's freedom and ability to choose. Rather, Paul shows that God has made provision from eternity for those whom He has foreseen would respond to the gospel and believe in Christ. The Greek term translated "to foreknow" (*proginōskō*) expresses God's knowing people from eternity. It is also important to note that the verb "to know" (Greek *ginōskō*; Hebrew *yada*), when used of God with regard to people in both the Old and New Testaments, expresses a richness of love and mercy mirrored in the healthy marital relationships of God's human

creatures. An often cited passage to illustrate this is, “You only have I known [Hebrew, *yada*; Greek Septuagint, *ginōskō*] of all the families of the earth” (Amos 3:2, ESV)², which expresses God’s loving foreknowledge and election of Israel. Inspired by the Spirit, Peter used the corresponding noun to this lovingly selective verb *proginōskō* when he addressed far-flung believers in the Roman Empire as “God’s elect... chosen according to the *foreknowledge* [*prognosis*, emphasis added] of God the Father” (1 Peter 1:1–2).

The foreknowledge of God is an exercise of omniscience (knowing everything) rather than omnipotence (being all-powerful). God’s knowledge of what will occur is not the same as making it happen without considering a person’s freedom of will. Assuming that God’s right to do something demands that He exercise that right (deliberately passing over and thus condemning certain people, as some teach) diminishes, rather than enhances, God’s sovereignty. This erroneous belief limits the holiness and justice of God; it does not reflect His gracious love and mercy toward all His human creatures.

Therefore, it is important to understand the difference between predestination, which is a biblical concept, and predeterminism, which is not. Predestination secures an eternal destiny for God’s people (the corporate body of Christ) whom He foreknew from eternity would respond to the conviction of His Spirit and accept His redemptive provision in Christ (John 14:2). Predeterminism, by contrast, asserts that God has decided everyone’s individual actions and fate in advance without noting their personal decision to believe. This distinction between these two terms is illustrated in Esther 4:13–14, where Mordecai warns Esther, “Do not think that because you are in the king’s house you alone of all the Jews will escape. For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father’s family will perish. And who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this?” God had predestined that Israel (corporate) would survive, but had not predetermined Esther’s (personal) fate: that was in her hands. A plan of salvation or escape for the corporate people of God would be provided, but individual participation was a matter of personal choice.

In His gracious and merciful sovereignty, God determined from eternity past the conditions on which He would show mercy, and provided the plan of salvation whereby all can be saved (Hebrews 2:9). In this plan humanity's free decisions, enabled by the Holy Spirit, are taken into consideration so that believers are chosen in Christ on the basis of His foreknowledge (Romans 8:29; Ephesians 1:4). Salvation is available to whoever will respond in faith to the gospel and to God's universal provision of prevenient grace.

II. Salvation Is Received and Assured by Faith

Being a Christian is certainly not a matter of good works. Salvation is solely by grace through faith (Ephesians 2:8–9). Faith accepts the fact that Christ died in place of sinful humankind so that forgiveness of sins is available. By faith humans may rely on the mercy of God and accept Christ as Savior. Faith grasps the wondrous reality that believing and repentant humans are now the recipients of the righteousness of Christ, credited to them through no merit of their own (Philippians 3:9), and “given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe” (Romans 3:22). Though “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God... all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus” (Romans 3:23–24; see also 5:1). Moreover, this gracious status with God is realized by the enablement of the Holy Spirit, who “testifies with our spirit that we are God's children” (Romans 8:16).

Though justified and credited with the righteousness of Christ, believers are also “created in Christ Jesus to do good works” (Ephesians 2:10). Moreover, they are charged in their daily lives to be “filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ” (Philippians 1:11). So the actual working out of the righteousness of Christ in the believer is an ongoing process. It involves purposeful and progressive spiritual formation, as aptly illustrated in 2 Peter 1:5–8:

Make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance,

godliness; and to godliness, mutual affection; and to mutual affection, love. For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. (See also Romans 6:12–13; 8:13; Colossians 3:1–5.)

Our personal spiritual growth varies in excellence and maturity as we learn obedience to God's Word and rely on the guidance and enablement of the Holy Spirit who dwells within. Yet, while still in the process of formation, imperfect though we may be, we remain justified through faith in Christ, never by good works. "Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Romans 8:1).

Spiritual growth also anticipates that the believer will be committed to following Christ in lifelong obedience to His teachings. The New Testament places great emphasis on faithfully walking through the tests of life and persevering in faith to the end of life. In the Parable of the Sower, Jesus said, "The seed on good soil stands for those with a noble and good heart, who hear the word, retain it, and by persevering [*en hypomonē*] produce a crop" (Luke 8:15). James picked up both concepts of faithfulness through tests and perseverance as he wrote, "the testing [*to dokimion*] of your faith produces perseverance [*hypomonēn*] (1:3). Peter added, "These [trials] have come so that the proven genuineness [*to dokimion*] of your faith... may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed" (1 Peter 1:7). The writer of Hebrews concurred, "You need to persevere [*hypomonēs*] so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised" (Hebrews 10:36).

The security of believers, then, comes through faith, both in the receiving of salvation and in continuing fellowship with Christ by His Spirit. With Paul, believers pray to "be found in him [Christ], not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith" (Philippians 3:9).

III. Salvation Is an Ongoing Conflict with Temptation and Sin

Temptation and sin are realities of life in a fallen world. While believers faithfully trust in and follow Christ, they are nonetheless subject to human frailty. Though granted justification and righteousness before God on the basis of the righteousness of Christ, they do not attain to sinless perfection in this world. “We all stumble in many ways” (James 3:2). “If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us” (1 John 1:8).

Nonetheless, the Scriptures emphasize that Christian life is to be lived on a positive trajectory of spiritual transformation. As previously emphasized, believers have been “born again” by the Spirit of God (John 3:3–8), they are “new creations” for whom the old has gone and the new has come (2 Corinthians 5:17). So John confidently repeated in his later epistle, “No one who is born of God will continue to sin” (1 John 3:9). The same Holy Spirit who convicts unbelievers of sin (John 16:8) continues to convict believers of sin and to guide them into truth (John 16:13). “No one who lives in him [Christ] keeps on sinning. No one who continues to sin has either seen him or known him” (1 John 3:6).

John added a further sobering note, “The one who does what is sinful is of the devil, because the devil has been sinning from the beginning” (1 John 3:8). Believers cannot keep on sinning the way unbelievers do. “Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase?” asked Paul (Romans 6:1). The answer is an emphatic negative. Continuing sinful practices will adversely affect the believer’s faith, and, if they are not repented of, will finally destroy faith.

When believers confess that they have sinned and turn to Christ in repentance, they do so with the secure knowledge that as a child of God they have “an advocate with the Father—Jesus Christ the Righteous One” (1 John 2:1). Further, “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9). Thus believers are assured of the provision of God to strengthen and

forgive them as they struggle with temptation and sin, never needing to doubt their salvation, which is based upon the righteousness of Christ accepted by faith.

It is also to be declared emphatically that believers are not in a revolving door, moving in and out of the grace of God! They are secure in the hand of God. “For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:38–39). Their standing as justified believers in Christ is always by faith. Without faith in Christ, there is no longer a saving relationship with him. This is why Scripture admonishes believers, “See to it, brothers, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart” (Hebrews 3:12).

IV. Salvation May Be Forfeited or Abandoned by Rejecting Christ

God, as a loving Heavenly Father, does not desire that any person fall away from the salvation He has graciously provided in Christ. “Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance” (2 Peter 3:9).

But, the Bible also teaches that believers who have accepted Christ as Savior can be lost if they repeatedly disregard the teachings of Scripture, continue to resist the conviction of the Holy Spirit, and finally reach the point where they have turned away from their Savior. Jesus makes that point in the Parable of the Sower where, speaking of some who have become believers, He said, “They believe for a while, but in the time of testing they fall away” (Luke 8:13). The writer of Hebrews wrote soberly of believers “who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit, who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age and who have fallen away” (Hebrews 6:4–6).

The apostle Peter warned, “If they [new believers] have escaped the corruption of the world by knowing our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and are again entangled in it and are overcome, they are worse off at the end than they were at the beginning. It would

have been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than to have known it and then to turn their backs on the sacred command that was passed on to them” (2 Peter 2:20–21).

The Bible surely warns against the possibility of forfeiting, or abandoning, salvation, but it never ceases to offer hope for anyone who will respond to the appeal of the Holy Spirit. Jesus’ invitation is without qualification. “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest” (Matthew 11:28). The apostle Paul, with great assurance, declared, “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved” (Romans 10:13). So Christians should never prematurely conclude that a struggling brother or sister is irredeemable. If the father did not give up on the lost son (Luke 15:11–31), neither should the Church of Jesus Christ.

Conclusion

The Christian faith is one of joyous, victorious life in Christ, in which spiritually transformed believers are informed by God’s Word and energized by His Spirit. Christian faith does entail obedience to the commands of Christ and responsible participation in the life of His church and the broader community. It does sometimes lead through sufferings of various kinds. But perseverance in faith is certain as believers remain in relationship with their Lord. With great assurance, Paul’s words remind us of our Lord’s unflagging commitment that “he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus” (Philippians 1:6).

Notes

1. All biblical citations are from the New International Version (NIV) unless otherwise indicated.
2. ESV refers to the English Standard Version of the Bible.

POSITION PAPER ON BAPTISM IN THE HOLY SPIRIT

(Adopted by the General Presbytery in session August 9-11, 2010)

Since the early days of the twentieth century, many Christian believers have taught and received a spiritual experience they call the baptism in the Holy Spirit. At the present time, hundreds of millions of believers identify themselves with the movement that teaches and encourages the reception of that experience. The global expansion of that movement demonstrates the words of Jesus Christ to His disciples that when the promised Holy Spirit came upon them, they would receive power to be His witnesses to all the world (Acts 1:5,8).

The New Testament emphasizes the centrality of the Holy Spirit's role in the ministry of Jesus and the continuation of that role in the Early Church. Jesus' public ministry was launched by the Holy Spirit coming upon Him (Matthew 3:16; Mark 1:10; Luke 3:22; John 1:32). The Book of Acts presents an extension of that ministry through the disciples by means of the empowering Holy Spirit.

The most distinguishing features of the baptism in the Holy Spirit are that: (1) it is theologically and experientially distinguishable from and subsequent to the new birth, (2) it is accompanied by speaking in tongues, and (3) it is distinct in purpose from the Spirit's work of regenerating the heart and life of a repentant sinner.

The Term "Baptism in the Holy Spirit"

The term "baptism in the Holy Spirit" does not occur in Scripture. It is a convenient designation for the experience predicted by John the Baptist that Jesus would "baptize in [Greek en] the Holy Spirit"¹ (Matthew 3:11; Mark 1:8; Luke 3:16; John 1:33) and is repeated by both Jesus (Acts 1:5) and Peter (Acts 11:16). It is significant that the expression occurs in all the Gospels as well as in the Book of Acts. The imagery of

baptism portrays immersion, as seen in John the Baptist's analogy between the baptism in water that he administered and the baptism in the Spirit that Jesus would administer.

Being baptized in the Spirit must be differentiated from Paul's statement in 1 Corinthians 12:13 which, following the Greek word order, reads: "by [en] one Spirit we all into one body were baptized." The context of that passage demonstrates that "by" is the best translation, indicating that the Holy Spirit is the instrument or means by which the baptizing takes place.² In verses 3 and 9 of the chapter, Paul uses the same preposition twice in each verse to indicate an activity of the Holy Spirit. In 1 Corinthians 12:13, "baptized into one body" speaks about the Spirit's work of incorporating a repentant sinner into the body of Christ (see Romans 6:3; Galatians 3:27 for the equivalent expression "baptized into Christ"). This is the "one baptism" of Ephesians 4:5; it is the indispensable, all-important baptism that results in the "one body" of verse 4.

To summarize: At conversion, the Spirit baptizes into Christ/the body of Christ; in a subsequent and distinct experience, Christ will baptize in the Holy Spirit.

Other Biblical Terms for Spirit Baptism

Various biblical terms are used for this experience, especially in the Book of Acts, which records the initial descent of the Spirit upon Jesus' disciples and gives examples of the Spirit's similar encounters with God's people. The following expressions in Acts are used interchangeably for the experience:

- baptized in the Spirit—1:5; 11:16; see also Matthew 3:11; Mark 1:8; Luke 3:16; John 1:33. The term "Spirit baptism" often serves as a useful substitute and is employed in this paper.
- the Spirit coming, or falling, upon—1:8; 8:16; 10:44; 11:15; 19:6; see also Luke 1:35; 3:22
- the Spirit poured out—2:17,18; 10:45
- the gift my Father promised—1:4
- the gift of the Spirit—2:38; 10:45; 11:17
- the gift of God—8:20; 11:17; 15:8
- receiving the Spirit—8:15,17,19; 19:2
- filled with the Spirit—2:4; 9:17; also Luke 1:15,41,67. This expression, along with "full of the Spirit," has a wider application in Luke's writings. Paul's command to

be “filled with the Spirit” (Ephesians 5:18) does not refer to the initial fullness of the Spirit; it is an injunction to keep on being filled with the Spirit.³

Not one of these terms fully conveys all that the experience involves. They are metaphors conveying the idea that the recipients are thoroughly dominated or overwhelmed by the Spirit, who already dwells in them (Romans 8:9,14–16; 1 Corinthians 6:19; Galatians 4:6).

Subsequence and Separability

Old Testament Background

The outpouring of the Spirit on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2) was the climax of God’s promises, made centuries before, about the institution of the new covenant and the coming of the age of the Spirit. The Old Testament is indispensable for understanding the coming of the Holy Spirit to believers under the new covenant. Two prophetic passages are especially significant—Ezekiel 36:25–27 and Joel 2:28,29:

I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws (Ezekiel 36:25-27). And afterward, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days (Joel 2:28–29).

The Ezekiel passage speaks about cleansing new believers from all spiritual filthiness and replacing their heart of stone with a “new heart” and a “heart of flesh.” This takes place as a result of the indwelling Holy Spirit, who will enable them to live in obedience to God’s decrees and laws. The promise predicts the New Testament teaching about regeneration. Jesus spoke of the need to be “born of the Spirit” (John 3:5,8) and Paul, echoing Ezekiel’s prophecy, says that God “saved us through the washing of rebirth and

renewal by the Holy Spirit” (Titus 3:5). The result is an altered lifestyle made possible by the indwelling Spirit.

Joel’s prophecy differs substantially from Ezekiel’s. It speaks of a dramatic pouring out of the Spirit that results in prophesying, dreams, and visions. The term charismatic in our day has come to identify those who believe in and experience, personally and corporately, the dynamic way the Spirit manifests himself through various gifts, such as those enumerated in 1 Corinthians 12:7–10.⁴ On the Day of Pentecost, the disciples were “filled with the Holy Spirit,” which Peter says was in fulfillment of Joel’s prophecy (Acts 2:16–21).

The prophecies of Ezekiel and Joel, however, do not predict two separate, historic comings of the Holy Spirit. They represent two aspects of the one overall promise that includes both the Spirit’s indwelling and His filling or empowering of God’s people.

Importance of Luke’s Writings

Luke’s writings—the third Gospel and the Book of Acts—provide the clearest understanding of the baptism in the Spirit. Luke, in addition to being an accurate historian, is also a theologian in his own right and uses the medium of historical narrative to convey theological truth.⁵

Apart from the four Gospels, the only undisputed references to John the Baptist’s prediction of Spirit baptism are in the Book of Acts (1:5; 11:16). In addition, Luke’s is the only Gospel that has two sayings of Jesus that relate directly to Spirit baptism: “If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him?” (11:13); “I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high” (24:49).

The opening chapter of Acts picks up the theme of these promises. Jesus told His disciples: “Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you

have heard me speak about. For John baptized with [en] water, but in a few days you will be baptized with [en] the Holy Spirit” (Acts 1:4,5); “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). The entire Book of Acts is a commentary on these verses, elaborating on the two related themes of spiritual empowerment and the spread of the gospel throughout the Roman Empire. It is therefore necessary to explore what Luke says about Spirit baptism.

This emphasis in Luke’s writings, however, does not minimize other important aspects of the Holy Spirit’s ministry in non-Lukan writings as, for example, in John 14–16; Romans 8; 1 Corinthians 12–14. Nor does it imply that all non-Lukan writers are silent on the matter of Spirit baptism or that Luke limits the Spirit’s activity only to Spirit baptism.

It is important to recognize that Luke wrote under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Since Luke-Acts is historical in nature, Luke selected incidents and sayings that emphasize the dynamic aspect of the Spirit’s work.

The first four chapters of Luke’s Gospel present a clear picture that the promised age of the Spirit was being inaugurated. Luke portrays the activity of the Holy Spirit in a manner clearly reminiscent of the prophecy of Joel. For four hundred years the activity of the Spirit among God’s people had been virtually absent. It now bursts forth in a succession of events related to the births of both John the Baptist and Jesus, and to the beginning of Jesus’ earthly ministry. Angelic visitations, miraculous conceptions, prophetic utterances, the Spirit’s descent upon Jesus at His baptism, the empowerment of Jesus for His earthly ministry—these are all recorded in rapid succession in order to emphasize the dawn of the promised age.

Methodology Followed

Narrative accounts recorded in Acts in which believers experience an initial filling of the Spirit have a direct bearing on the questions of whether Spirit baptism is separate from

regeneration and whether speaking in tongues is a necessary component of the experience. The inductive method will be employed in looking at these incidents; it is a valid form of logic that attempts to form a conclusion based on the study of individual incidents or statements.⁶

“Subsequence” in Acts

The Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:1–21). The first instance of disciples receiving a charismatic-type of experience occurred on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:1–4). The coming of the Spirit on that day was unprecedented; it was a unique, historic, once-for-all and unrepeatable event connected with the institution of the new covenant. But as Acts indicates, at a personal level the disciples’ experience at Pentecost serves as a paradigm for later believers as well (8:14–20; 9:17; 10:44–48; 19:1–7).

Was the Pentecost experience of the disciples “subsequent” to their conversion? On one occasion Jesus told seventy-two of His disciples to “rejoice that your names are written in heaven” (Luke 10:20). It is not necessary to pinpoint the precise moment of their regeneration in the New Testament sense of that word. Had they died prior to the descent of the Spirit at Pentecost, they surely would have gone into the presence of the Lord. Many scholars, however, see the disciples’ new-birth experience occurring at the time the resurrected Jesus “breathed on them and said, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit’ ” (John 20:22).

It is significant that the New Testament nowhere equates the expression “filled with the Holy Spirit” (verse 4) with regeneration. It is always used in connection with persons who are already believers.

The Samaritans (8:14–20). The Samaritan “Pentecost” demonstrates that one may be a believer and yet not have a charismatic-type of spiritual experience. The following observations show that the Samaritans were genuine followers of Jesus prior to the visit of Peter and John: (1) Philip clearly proclaimed to them the good news of the gospel (verse 5); (2) they believed and were baptized (verses 12,16); (3) they had “accepted

[dechomai] the word of God” (verse 14), an expression synonymous with conversion (Acts 11:1; 17:11; see also 2:41); (4) the laying on of hands by Peter and John was for them to “receive the Holy Spirit” (verse 17), a practice the New Testament never associates with receiving salvation; and (5) the Samaritans, subsequent to their conversion, had an observable and dramatic experience of the Spirit (verse 18).

Saul of Tarsus (Acts 9:17). The experience of Saul of Tarsus also demonstrates that being filled with the Holy Spirit is an identifiable experience beyond the Spirit’s work in regeneration. Three days after his encounter with Jesus on the Damascus Road (Acts 9:1– 19), he was visited by Ananias. The following observations are important: (1) Ananias addressed him as “Brother Saul,” which probably indicates a mutually fraternal relationship to the Lord Jesus Christ; (2) Ananias did not call on Saul to repent and believe, though he did encourage him to be baptized (Acts 22:16); (3) Ananias laid his hands on Saul for both healing and being filled with the Spirit; and (4) There was a time span of three days between Saul’s conversion and his being filled with the Spirit.

Household of Cornelius at Caesarea (Acts 10:44–48). The narrative about Cornelius reaches its climax with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon him and his household. He was not a Christian prior to Peter’s visit; he was a God-fearer—a Gentile who had forsaken paganism and embraced important aspects of Judaism without becoming a proselyte, that is, a full-fledged Jew. Apparently Cornelius’s household believed and were regenerated at the moment Peter spoke of Jesus as the one through whom “everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name” (verse 43). Simultaneously, it seems, they experienced an outpouring of the Spirit like the one on the Day of Pentecost, as Peter later told the leadership of the church in Jerusalem (11:17; 15:8,9). The expressions used to describe that experience do not occur elsewhere in Acts to describe conversion: “the Holy Spirit fell upon” (10:44; cf. 8:16 [both references NASB Updated]); “the gift of the Holy Spirit” (10:45; 11:17; cf. 8:20); “poured out on” (10:45); “baptized with [en] the Holy Spirit” (11:16).

The Spirit baptism of the new believers in Caesarea parallels that of believers in Jerusalem (Acts 2), Samaria (Acts 8), and Damascus (Acts 9). But unlike the experience of their predecessors, they had a unified experience whereby their conversion and their baptism in the Spirit occurred in rapid succession.

The Disciples in Ephesus (Acts 19:1–7). At Ephesus, Paul encountered a group of disciples who had not experienced the baptism in the Spirit. This incident raises three important questions:

1. Were these men disciples of Jesus or disciples of John the Baptist? Throughout the Book of Acts, every other occurrence of the word “disciple” (mathetes), with one exception,⁷ refers to a follower of Jesus. Luke’s reason for calling these men “some disciples” is that he was not sure of the exact number—“about twelve men in all” (verse 7). They were Christian believers in need of teaching; like Apollos (Acts 18:24–27), they needed to have “the way of God” explained “more adequately” (18:26).
2. What did Paul mean by the question, “Did you receive the Holy Spirit, having believed?” (a strict translation of verse 2).⁸ He sensed among them a spiritual lack, but did not question the validity of their belief in Jesus. Since in the Book of Acts the clause “to receive the Holy Spirit” refers to Spirit baptism⁹ (8:15,17,19; 10:47; see also 2:38), Paul is asking if they have had the experience of the Holy Spirit coming upon them in a charismatic way, as did indeed happen to them subsequently (verse 6).
3. Does Paul agree with Luke that there is a work of the Spirit for believers that is distinguishable from the Spirit’s work in salvation? This incident at Ephesus, as well as Paul’s own experience (Acts 9:17), requires an affirmative answer.

Summary Statements

1. In three of the five instances—Samaria, Damascus, Ephesus—persons who had an identifiable experience of the Spirit were already believers. At Caesarea, that experience was almost simultaneous with the saving faith of Cornelius and his household. In Jerusalem, the recipients were already believers in Christ even though it may be difficult—if it is even necessary—to determine with certainty the point in time when they were regenerated in the New Testament sense.
2. In three accounts there was a time-lapse between conversion and Spirit baptism (Samaria, Damascus, Ephesus). The waiting interval for the Jerusalem outpouring was necessary in order for the typological significance of the Day of Pentecost to be fulfilled. In the case of Caesarea, there was no distinguishable time lapse.
3. A variety of interchangeable terminology is used for the experience of Spirit baptism.

4. Groups (Jerusalem, Samaria, Caesarea, Ephesus) as well as an individual (Paul) received the experience.
5. The imposition of hands is mentioned in three instances (Samaria, Damascus, Ephesus) but it is not a requirement, as evidenced by the outpourings in Jerusalem and Caesarea.
6. Even though Spirit baptism is a gift of God's grace, it should not be called "a second work of grace" or "a second blessing." Such language implies that a believer can have no experience or experiences of divine grace between conversion and Spirit baptism.
7. The ideal and biblically correct view is that a time-gap between regeneration and Spirit baptism is not a requirement. The emphasis should be on theological, not temporal, subsequence and separability.

Speaking in tongues

Spirit-Inspired Utterances Prior to Acts 2

In the Old Testament, the Holy Spirit manifested himself in a variety of ways, but His most characteristic and most frequent work and ministry was that of giving inspired utterance. In addition to prophetic writings, there were many instances when people prophesied orally at the Spirit's prompting—for example, Numbers 11:25–26; 24:2,3; 1 Samuel 10:6,10; 19:20–21. This inspiration to prophesy is the link that connects Old Testament oracular utterances with Joel's prediction that one day all God's people would prophesy (Joel 2:28,29) and with Moses' intense desire—he himself being a prophet—that all God's people might prophesy (Numbers 11:29).

A vital connection exists between Old Testament people prophesying and comparable experiences of New Testament people prior to the Day of Pentecost, especially as recorded in Luke 1–4. In those chapters Luke records that certain people were filled with the Spirit—John the Baptist, his mother Elizabeth, and his father Zechariah—and also that a number of people prophesied under the influence of the Holy Spirit—Elizabeth, Zechariah, Mary, and Simeon. In addition, mention is made of Anna, a prophetess (2:36).

Evidential Tongues in Acts

The Day of Pentecost (2:1–21). Three dramatic phenomena occurred: a violent wind, fire, and speaking in tongues.¹⁰ The wind and the fire, which in Scripture are symbols of the Holy Spirit, preceded the outpouring of the Spirit; but the phenomenon of speaking in tongues was an integral part of the disciples' experience of Spirit baptism. The impetus for speaking in tongues was the Holy Spirit. The Greek verb *apophthengomai* at the end of verse 4 occurs again in verse 14 to introduce Peter's speech to the crowd. It is an unusual and infrequently used word, and may be translated "to give inspired utterance."

The Greek verb phrase for speaking in tongues (*lalein glossais*) does not appear in nonbiblical literature as a technical term for speaking a language one does not know. But it is used by both Luke (Acts 2:4; 10:46; 19:6) and Paul (1 Corinthians 12:30; 13:1; 14:5,6,18,23,39) with that meaning.

The Greek word *glossa* means the tongue as the organ of speech and, by extension, the product of speech—language. In Acts 2, the languages spoken by the disciples were unknown to them but were understood by others. They were human, identifiable languages. Luke says that the disciples spoke in other tongues—that is, languages not their own. However, in the other occurrences in Acts where speaking in tongues is mentioned (10:46; 19:6), there is no indication the languages were understood or identified. Paul's writings imply that Spirit-inspired languages may not always be human, but may be spiritual, heavenly, or angelic (1 Corinthians 13:1; 14:2,14) as a means of communication between a believer and God.

Two very important observations are in order:

1. On the Day of Pentecost, all who were filled with the Spirit spoke in tongues (Acts 2:4).
2. Peter, in explaining to the crowd the meaning of the disciples' experience, said it was in fulfillment of Joel 2:28,29 (Acts 2:16–21). Especially significant is that Peter, in the middle of quoting Joel, inserted the words "and they will prophesy" (verse 18c), stressing prophetic utterance as a key feature of the fulfillment. But is speaking in tongues the same as prophesying? Both oral prophesying and

speaking in tongues occur when the Holy Spirit comes upon someone and prompts the person to speak. The basic difference is that prophesying is in the speaker's own language, whereas speaking in tongues is in a language unknown to the speaker. But the mode of operation for the two gifts is the same. Speaking in tongues may therefore be considered a specialized or variant form of prophesying as to the manner in which it functions.

The Samaritans (8:14–20). The Samaritans had witnessed signs performed by Philip, had responded in faith to the message about Christ, and had submitted to baptism. But they had not yet received the Holy Spirit (verse 15). “Peter and John placed their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit” (verse 17). Simon the sorcerer found something so extraordinary in this gift of the Spirit that he immediately wanted the authority to impart the gift himself. He had already witnessed demon expulsions and healings, but this was markedly different. Luke simply says that Simon “saw” or witnessed that the Spirit was given; something observable took place. The consensus among biblical scholars, many of whom are not Pentecostal or charismatic, is that the Samaritans had a glossolalic experience.

This account falls between the two major narratives in chapters 2 and 10 that unambiguously associate glossolalia with Spirit baptism. Therefore this incident may rightly be called “The Samaritan Pentecost.”

Saul of Tarsus (9:17). Luke does not record any details of Paul's Spirit baptism. We do know, however, that Paul spoke in tongues regularly and often (1 Corinthians 14:18). It seems legitimate and logical to infer that he first spoke in tongues at the time Ananias laid hands on him. As with the Samaria account, this narrative comes between the two incidents that clearly say all spoke in tongues when they were baptized in the Spirit.

The Household of Cornelius at Caesarea (Acts 10:44–48). Several observations are important:

1. Peter clearly identified the experience of Cornelius's household with that of the Pentecost disciples: “God gave them the same gift as he gave us” (Acts 11:17; see also 15:8). In addition, common terms like “baptized with [en] the Holy Spirit,” “poured out,” and “gift” appear in both accounts.

2. The outward, observable manifestation of glossolalia convinced Peter's Jewish-Christian companions that the Spirit had indeed fallen on these Gentiles: "For they heard them speaking in tongues and praising God" (verse 46, italics added for emphasis).
3. Very likely, the phrase "praising [megaluno]¹¹ God" is a commentary on the content of the glossolalia. Acts 2:11 is relevant, which identifies the content of the glossolalia on Pentecost as a recital of "the wonders [megaleia] of God."
4. All the recipients spoke in tongues (verse 44). This incident and the Pentecost incident which also says that all spoke in tongues indisputably and unambiguously connect glossolalia with the baptism in the Spirit. The two narratives bracket the two in chapters 8 and 9 where Luke did not give details about the believers' Spirit experience.

The Disciples in Ephesus (Acts 19:1–7). When the Holy Spirit came upon these disciples, "they spoke in tongues and prophesied" (verse 6). The Greek text may be translated: "Not only [te] did they speak in tongues, but they also [kai] prophesied."¹²

Summary Statements

1. Throughout the Old Testament, the early chapters of Luke's Gospel and the Book of Acts, there is a pattern of inspired speech when the Holy Spirit comes upon people.
2. The outpouring of the Spirit on the Day of Pentecost is the model, or paradigm, for later outpourings.
3. Speaking in tongues, as to the manner in which it occurs, may be regarded as a specialized or variant form of prophecy.
4. Speaking in tongues was an integral part of Spirit baptism in the Book of Acts. It is the only manifestation associated with Spirit baptism which is explicitly presented as evidence authenticating the experience, and on that basis should be considered normative.
5. The Pentecostal doctrine of "the initial, physical evidence" of speaking in tongues is an attempt to encapsulate the thought that at the time of Spirit baptism the believer will speak in tongues. It conveys the idea that speaking in tongues is the initial, empirical accompaniment to Spirit baptism. Nowhere does the Scripture indicate that one may be baptized in the Spirit without speaking in tongues.
6. First Corinthians 12:30 is sometimes elicited as evidence that tongues are not a necessary component of Spirit baptism since Paul asks, "Not all speak in tongues, do they?"¹³ But both the broad context and the immediate context relate the question to the exercise of the gift in corporate worship, as noted by the question immediately following: "Not all interpret, do they?" According to 1 Corinthians 12:8–10, only some believers are prompted by the Holy Spirit to give an utterance in tongues in a gathering of God's people.

Practical aspects of Spirit Baptism

Continuing Evidences of Spirit Baptism

Divinely-intended results of Spirit baptism include:

Speaking in Tongues. Speaking in tongues is the initial, empirical indication that the infilling has taken place but it also benefits the speaker spiritually, for Paul says that “anyone who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men but to God” and that “he who speaks in a tongue edifies himself” (1 Corinthians 14:2,4). This is the devotional aspect of tongues, which is associated with praising God and giving Him thanks (verses 16,17). This aspect is sometimes called a prayer language. It is an element in praying in the Spirit (Ephesians 6:18; Jude 20). Because it is a means by which believers edify themselves spiritually, tongues may be called a means of grace. It is not an experience that occurs only at the time of being baptized in the Spirit; it ought to be a continual, repeated experience. This is implied in Paul’s statement to the Corinthians: “I wish all of you to continue speaking in tongues” (1 Corinthians 14:5, a strict translation reflecting the Greek verb tense).

In addition, some qualified exegetes understand Paul to mean praying in tongues, or at least to include it, when he says that “the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express” (Romans 8:26).

Openness to Spiritual Manifestations. Spirit baptism opens up the receiver to the full range of spiritual gifts. This is a natural consequence of having already submitted to something supernatural and suprarational by allowing oneself to be overwhelmed by the Spirit. But this does not rule out spiritual gifts among those not Spirit filled. Both the Old Testament and the Gospels show that most of the gifts occurred prior to the Day of Pentecost, yet it was not until after the outpouring of the Spirit on that day that there

occurred among God's people a much higher incidence and a broader range of spiritual gifts. Since the edification of God's people is the overarching purpose of spiritual gifts in the assembly (1 Corinthians 12:7; 14:3–6,12), Spirit-filled believers should desire them earnestly (1 Corinthians 12:31; 14:1).

Righteous Living. Spirit baptism has implications for righteous living. Number 7 of the Assemblies of God “Statement of Fundamental Truths” states that with the baptism in the Spirit “comes the enduement of power for life and service.” The phrase “for life” means “for righteous living.” If, indeed, Spirit baptism is an immersion in the One who is the Holy Spirit—the most frequent New Testament designation for Him—the experience must in some way relate to personal holiness. A basic problem with some believers in the Corinthian congregation was that they continued to speak in tongues without allowing the Spirit to work internally in their lives. It is at this point that the Spirit-baptized need to understand that spiritual fruit, and not only spiritual gifts, should issue from the Pentecostal experience.

Spirit baptism does not produce instant sanctification (nothing does!), but it gives the recipient an added impetus to pursue a life pleasing to God. In this connection, it is important to see the link between being continually filled with the Spirit and its consequences in the believer's life—a joyful spirit, ministry to others, thanksgiving, mutual submission and mutual respect (Ephesians 5:18 to 6:9).

The baptism in the Spirit must not be a one-time experience. In addition to the Spirit's daily internal work in one's life, there are occasions when He comes upon believers in times of crisis or to meet a special need; those times are also designated as being “filled with the Spirit” (Acts 4:8,31; 13:9,52).

Power for Witnessing. The association of power with the Holy Spirit is common in the New Testament, and sometimes the two terms are interchangeable (for example, Luke 1:35; 4:14; Acts 10:38; Romans 15:19; 1 Corinthians 2:4; 1 Thessalonians 1:5). The ascended Jesus told the disciples to remain in Jerusalem until they were “clothed with power from on high” (Luke 24:49). In Acts, He tells them “you will receive power when

the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses” (1:8). These themes of Spirit baptism and world evangelization are closely related emphases in the Book of Acts. A cause-effect relationship between the two is obvious, but Jesus did not say that world evangelization was the sole purpose of the power. The Spirit’s work in Spirit baptism must be understood in a wider context than that which Acts emphasizes, yet a Spirit-baptized person who does not bear witness to Christ is a contradiction in terms.

Both from a biblical standpoint and from a missionary/evangelistic standpoint, receiving this power must be understood to include the proclamation of the gospel. The proclamation is primarily verbal, but the power Jesus promised included the performance of miracles in His name. The Book of Acts records evidences of the Spirit’s work—vocal gifts, healings, exorcisms, raisings from the dead, etc.—which the Lord used in preparing an audience for the proclamation of the gospel.

Encouragement for Those Not Yet Baptized

The Scriptures do not give a formula for receiving the initial infilling of the Spirit, but the following considerations will be helpful:

All Believers Are Candidates. Joel predicted that the Lord would pour out His Spirit upon all His people (2:28–29). Old and young, male and female, servants—no distinction as to age, gender, or social status—are included in the promise. This echoes the fervent hope (and prophecy!) of Moses that the Lord would put His Spirit upon all His people (Numbers 11:29). Prophetic endowment would no longer be limited to a select few. Peter underscored this theme in his Pentecost speech when he quoted the Joel passage and then declared that the promised gift of the Spirit was “for you [Jews] and your children [descendants] and for all who are far off” (verses 38,39). “Far off” probably means the Gentiles (Ephesians 2:13,17); some interpret it to mean those who are distant chronologically and geographically. Interested believers must be assured and convinced that the experience is indeed for them.

The Spirit Already Indwells All Believers. It is important to stress that the Holy Spirit is not external to a believer not yet baptized in the Spirit. The Spirit works internally in a repentant and believing person to effect the new birth; He does not then depart, to come back at the time of the infilling. Spirit-baptism is an overwhelming experience of the already indwelling Spirit; it is called by some a “release” of the Spirit.

Baptism in the Spirit Is a Gift. By definition, a gift is not earned. If it were on the basis of a person's merit, the unanswerable question would be, “What should be the extent of the person's worthiness?” Or, “How ‘perfect’ must one be before qualifying for the experience?” It is possible for a sincere seeker to be so preoccupied with a sense of personal unworthiness that the Spirit cannot flow freely through that person.

God Will Not Permit Sincere Seekers to Have a Counterfeit Experience. Some are fearful that their “speaking in tongues” will be either self-generated or that it will be prompted by Satan. Such persons need to be assured of Jesus' words, “If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him!” This is in a context that says even an earthly father will not permit a requested fish to be substituted by a snake or a requested egg to be substituted by a scorpion (Luke 11:11–13).

Expectancy and Openness Facilitate Reception. Candidates must be willing to yield to whatever the Lord prompts them to do. While genuine speaking in tongues cannot be self-generated, the seeker must cooperate with, or be borne along by, the Holy Spirit and to give vocal expression to an inner prompting to utter unfamiliar sounds. The experience of the disciples on the Day of Pentecost is instructive; they spoke in tongues “as the Spirit was giving them utterance” (Acts 2:4, NASB Updated).

Prayer and Praise Often Lead into the Experience. Jesus' teaching on the Father's disposition to give the Holy Spirit to those that ask Him (Luke 11:13) follows an extended passage on prayer (verses 1–12) in which He elaborates on and illustrates the aspect of persistence. The Greek verbs for “ask,” “seek,” and “knock” are in the Greek present tense, suggesting the thought of “keep asking, keep seeking, keep knocking.”

This should be distinguished from begging in desperation and frustration; it is more the idea of the beatitude, “Blessed are those who keep hungering and thirsting for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied” (Matthew 5:6, a strict translation). It should be noted that prior to the Day of Pentecost, the disciples were “all joined together constantly in prayer” (Acts 1:14).

Petition should be combined with praise. The Upper Room praying was complemented by the disciples staying “continually at the temple, praising God” (Luke 24:53). Spirit baptism seekers should be engaged in praise as well as in petition, since praising God in one's own language often facilitates the transition to praising Him in tongues. It is notable that the content of the Pentecost disciples' utterances was praise for the mighty works of God (Acts 2:11; note also 10:46). This is especially interesting since the Jewish celebration of Pentecost, a harvest festival, was a time of joy and thanksgiving to God. Even on a personal basis, an individual offering to God the firstfruits of the grain harvest engaged in a recital of God's mighty act of delivering Israel from Egyptian slavery (Deuteronomy 26:1–11).

Special Blessings May Occur Along the Way. The baptism in the Spirit is attested by speaking in tongues, but one may have other valid and meaningful spiritual experiences between regeneration and Spirit baptism. Sometimes these blessings are a foreshadowing or taste of the climactic experience, serving to prepare for and facilitate the receiving of the Spirit's fullness, but they should not be identified as Spirit baptism itself.

God's Timing May Differ from Ours. The Lord responds to believing prayer and praise, but for reasons best known to himself, His timing may not coincide with our wishes. Both in Scripture and in church history, outpourings of the Spirit sometimes occurred in unexpected places and at unexpected times. Consequently, seekers should not be discouraged or get under self-condemnation if the infilling of the Spirit does not take place when they expect. But during times of special spiritual visitation when others are being filled with the Spirit, conditions are optimum for the seeker.

Concluding statement

Baptism in the Holy Spirit must be more than a safeguarded and cherished doctrine; it must be a vital, productive and ongoing experience in the life of believers and their personal relationship with the Lord, their interaction with other believers, and their witness to the world. The vitality and vibrancy of the Church can be realized only when believers personally and corporately manifest the power of the Holy Spirit that was experienced by Jesus himself and that He promised to His followers.

Appendix

The official doctrinal statements of the Assemblies of God regarding baptism in the Holy Spirit are found in the Statement of Fundamental Truths and are as follows:

7. The Baptism in the Holy Spirit

All believers are entitled to and should ardently expect and earnestly seek the promise of the Father, the baptism in the Holy Spirit and fire, according to the command of our Lord Jesus Christ. This was the normal experience of all in the early Christian church. With it come the enduement of power for life and service, the bestowment of the gifts and their uses in the work of the ministry (Luke 24:49; Acts 1:4,8; 1 Corinthians 12:1–31). This experience is distinct from and subsequent to the experience of the new birth (Acts 8:12–17; 10:44–46; 11:14–16; 15:7–9). With the baptism in the Holy Spirit come such experiences as an overflowing fullness of the Spirit (John 7:37–39; Acts 4:8), a deepened reverence for God (Acts 2:43; Hebrews 12:28), an intensified consecration to God and dedication to His work (Acts 2:42), and a more active love for Christ, for His Word, and for the lost (Mark 16:20).

8. The Initial Physical Evidence of the Baptism in the Holy Spirit

The baptism of believers in the Holy Spirit is witnessed by the initial physical sign of speaking with other tongues as the Spirit of God gives them utterance (Acts 2:4). The

speaking in tongues in this instance is the same in essence as the gift of tongues (1 Corinthians 12:4–10,28), but different in purpose and use.

Notes

1. Literal translation. All biblical quotations are from the New International Version (NIV) except as otherwise indicated.
2. Some reliable New Testament translations that opt for ‘by’ include NIV, NASB updated, NKJV, and KJV.
3. The verb is in the Greek present tense, which conveys the meaning of a continuing or ongoing action.
4. The Greek word charisma, however, has a wider range of meanings in the NT. Its basic meaning is that it is a gracious gift.
5. See I. Howard Marshall's, *Luke: Historian and Theologian*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1970.
6. The formulated doctrine of the Trinity is the result of an inductive study of Scripture, as is the doctrine of the hypostatic union—that Christ was and is both fully human and fully divine, yet one person.
7. Acts 9:25, where the phrase “his disciples” (NASB Updated) refers to followers of Paul. NIV reads “his followers.”
8. For “having believed [pisteusantes],” Greek grammar allows for a translation either of “when you believed” (coincident time) or “after you believed” (antecedent time). Context favors the latter.
9. In John’s Gospel, of course, the resurrected Jesus did address the disciples with the imperative, “Receive the Holy Spirit” (20:22). Biblical scholars understand John’s usage variously, some seeing it as the immediately realized gift of the Spirit in regeneration, others as anticipation of the Pentecost event, and still others as an independent Johannine report of Pentecost.
10. The English technical term for speaking in tongues is “glossolalia,” from the Greek words glossa (tongue, language) and lalia (speech). The word does not occur in Scripture.
11. See Luke 1:46 and Acts 19:17 for parallel occurrences.
12. The Greek construction is *te... kai* which, along with *te kai*, is common in the Book of Acts. The following are possible translations: “as... so; not only... but also.” Some grammatical examples are in Acts 1:1,8; 4:27; 8:12; 9:2; 22:4; 26:3. *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (3rd ed.). Revised and edited by Frederick William Danker. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000, p. 993.
13. A strict translation, based on the Greek form of the seven questions in this verse.

POSITION PAPER ON CHRISTIANS AND CITIZENSHIP

(Adopted by the General Presbytery in session August 4-5, 2025)

Summary

Christians are called to be “in the world” and “not of the world” (John 17:11–16).¹ We must embrace our identity as Christian citizens, as public witnesses, and as salt and light. Believers must also maintain their Christian character while engaging in politics. We prioritize our calling in Christ and do not condone the demonization of fellow citizens with whom we disagree. Such negative conduct can detract from the mission of Christ and the aligned Assemblies of God (AG) mission to evangelize, worship God, build disciples, and show compassion.²

Introduction

In the high priestly prayer of John 17, Jesus acknowledged that He and His followers are not of this world. Yet, He prayed that the Father would not take His followers from this world (vv. 14–16). This prayer offers a point of departure for discussing the relationship between Christians and civic or political systems. The term *world* in the New Testament encompasses more than government or political systems. Yet, it includes them and is epitomized by them.³

This paper aims to offer principles that help believers learn to live

1. “in the world,” as Christians bear the responsibility to represent Christ in their civic lives; and
2. “not of this world,” as Christians avoid being co-opted by worldly ends or seduced into carrying out their missional influence by worldly means.

Biblical Principles

The Bible offers clear principles to help Christians navigate citizenship. The apostle Paul told the Philippians that their “citizenship is in heaven” (Philippians 3:20). He shared a similar thought in Ephesians 2:19. However, other citizenships mattered, too. Being a Roman citizen made a key difference for people in the ancient world. Paul valued being born a Roman citizen. He used his rights as a citizen to avoid unjust treatment (Acts 22:22–29). Paul even appealed a sentence to Caesar, as was his right (Acts 25:11).

Identity

Citizenship was a matter of primary identity for Paul. The Philippians to whom Paul wrote understood the idea of dual citizenship. They held citizenship in Philippi and Rome, over eight hundred miles apart. Their claim to status and protection came from Rome, not Philippi. The distant citizenship held a primacy in their lives in terms of both benefits and obligations. Similarly, Christians are citizens of earth but also of a distant land—heaven. Like the Philippians, Christians’ citizenships vary in quality and their claims upon citizens.

Paul did not call the Philippians to disavow their earthly citizenship. He contrasted himself (and the Christians in Philippi) with those who live as “enemies of the cross of Christ” (Philippians 3:18). Enemies of Christ “have their minds set on earthly things” (3:19; compare Romans 8:5–6 and Colossians 3:2). They are in the world and of the world, thus, entirely invested in worldly concerns. Followers of Paul and Christ, though they live in the world, are not controlled by it. Their citizenship is a heavenly one.

First Peter 2:9–12 and Hebrews 11:13 also deal with Christian identity. These passages describe believers as foreigners and exiles on this earth. Peter’s letter also refers to Christians as “a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation,” and “God’s special possession” who live as holy examples (1 Peter 2:9, 11–12). The next passage

presents another major theme in the relationship between Christians and the state: submission and obedience to authority (1 Peter 2:13–14).

Submission

After addressing Christian identity, Peter urged his audience to submit to every human authority (1 Peter 2:13–17). Though not as strongly as Paul in Romans 13, Peter asserted the government's role in affirming order and discouraging evil. Governments are essential, and believers are expected to follow the law.

However, the submission is “for the Lord's sake” (1 Peter 2:13). Much stronger language describes believers' duty to God than to human authorities. Believers must “live as God's slaves” and “fear God” (1 Peter 2:16–17). On the other hand, though not equally, they are to “submit... to every human authority” and “honor the emperor” (2:13, 17). Living as God's slaves and fearing God are much stronger terms than submission (deference) and honor. Obedience to human authority is important, but such obedience is in the broader context of obedience to God. When obedience to earthly authorities contradicts Christian commitments, obedience to God is the priority. As Peter said in Acts 5:29 to the authorities in Jerusalem when ordered to no longer teach in the name of Jesus, “We must obey God rather than human beings!”

Witness

Peter and Paul depicted the Christian's role in society with a common goal. Both voiced concern with Christian witness among unbelievers. This concept of witness provides another guiding theme for Christians and their relationship to civic life. Matthew 28:19–20 and Acts 1:8 clarify the role of Christians in the world. These passages teach that believers are Christ's representatives on earth. They testify of salvation and lead unbelievers into disciplined obedience to the lordship of Christ. As Paul explained, “We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God” (2 Corinthians 5:20). This text teaches the main role Christians play in society.

Historical Examples

For nearly two millennia, the Church has grown in diverse cultural and political contexts. Each context offered a variety of forms of government and expectations for its citizens. Likewise, other branches of the Church developed a variety of models of relationships with the state. These models shaped a range of expectations of Christian responsibility to the state.

The models presented here are illustrative but not exhaustive. They provide a framework for understanding the various ways parts of the Church related to the state and where all those ways could go poorly.⁴

1. In ancient times, the head of state often led the state religion. This is called “caesaropapism” or the Constantinian model. This model can blur the line between Christian faith and citizenship.
2. Lutheranism’s “Two Kingdoms” proposed that God works through the Church and secular government, each with distinct roles. In this model, the Church could lose its voice critiquing the government as a separate sphere of authority.
3. Reformed churches viewed political systems as part of God’s creation, but emphasized their human and corruptible nature. They advocated for the Church’s reforming role. This model threatened to treat the Church’s authority as political.
4. The Anabaptists, also a part of the Reformation movement, opposed the influence of political systems. They sought to create separate, apolitical Christian communities. In this model, Christians could potentially lose their witness without political involvement.
5. The Liberation model took a prophetic stance, challenging injustice and appealing to a higher moral authority. This model risks reducing a relationship with the government to one issue or cause.

These models offer ideals with advantages and disadvantages. Pentecostals embraced one model over the others at various times. Depending on their experience of political oppression or support, they found particular models more useful than others.

In the first half of the twentieth century, the Assemblies of God in the United States stayed apolitical while keeping a prophetic voice. By the end of the century, the AG favored the “Two Kingdoms” and Reformed approaches. In twenty-first-century America, some in the AG stressed political power as a way to promote biblical values.

Articles 10 and 11 of the “Statement of Fundamental Truths” describe the mission of the Church as evangelizing, worshipping God, building up believers, and showing compassion. This mission intersects with the political and social world. Yet, believers who aim to glorify God and rightly reflect His kingdom must govern such activities by mission principles.

Principles of Christian Engagement in Citizenship

The previous models provide a framework for how Christians engaged the politics of society. They aimed to live out their faith within an in-the-world-but-not-of-the-world paradigm. No doubt, Christians live in the world. We work, play, and worship within societies that do not always reflect our beliefs or values. Yet Christians are not of this world. The Bible calls believers to reject the world’s systems and to be transformed (Romans 12:1–2). Christian faith transforms the issues we engage in and *how* we engage them.

Christian Identity as Primary

Like the Philippians, we have dual citizenship. Though we are earthly citizens, we are first citizens of Christ’s superior kingdom. Our primary identity does not derive from a particular earthly state. Instead, it comes from being “in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28). The primary commitment, in terms of identification, conduct, and orientation to the world must be an allegiance to Christ. In the context of the United States, this means that one is a Christian before he or she is a U.S. citizen. These two identities, though not necessarily in conflict, must never be confused.

Appropriate Submission as Necessary

Citizens of heaven bear responsibility during their time as citizens of this world. God called believers to submit to earthly powers. Responsible citizenship includes respect for governing authorities, even when disagreeing with decisions. Citizens with a vote must stay well-informed. Being aware and evaluating what is happening in one’s

community is vital. Believers must contribute to maintaining the peace in society, whether through action or example, in person or online. Embrace the opportunities citizenship offers—voting, running for political office, showing up for jury duty, and the like.

Christians should support the protection of religious freedom. No political figure, party, or system has the power to stop the spread of God's kingdom. Moreover, no political figure, party, or system has the authority to represent God's kingdom fully. Religious freedom means both the freedom to worship God fully and the freedom to reject God. No one can truly say yes to God if they cannot also say no. We must protect the freedom to say either.

Christian identity takes priority over national identity. Similarly, Christian obedience to Christ takes precedence over any earthly allegiance. Submission and obedience to God and the state are not identical and must never be confused. Neither 1 Peter 2:13–17 nor Romans 13:7 argues to offer the state worship. While Christians generally obey and submit to earthly authorities, earthly authorities are not absolutes. All submission occurs under the umbrella of Christian allegiance to God. His Person and kingdom cannot be compared with or subjected to any earthly power.

Witness as Our Core Mission

For the New Testament writers, being witnesses of God's reconciling work in Christ is a core responsibility of believers. Anything that interferes with this work opposes the Christian faith, no matter the motivation. Acting in the name of Christ while undermining the gospel's presentation and the Church's mission risks disobedience to Christ (Matthew 28:19–20). Let it not be said of us that people blaspheme the name of God because of us (Romans 2:24).

Areas for such confusion are politics and civic engagement. Societal issues are complex and multifaceted. Some political and social entities demand allegiance and present simplistic answers that create us-vs-them scenarios. Desiring to make a

positive difference in the world, well-meaning Christians often choose a side and universally adopt its stance on all the issues. In so doing, they can alienate others and damage their ability to witness to them. In a worst-case scenario, a chosen side might reveal itself as opposing Christian faith and virtue. Christians must be careful in participating in any potentially harmful system that does not accurately represent Christ or His kingdom.

Christians should ensure that their civic engagements are in harmony with their core task—representing Christ to the world. Losing the ability to witness is never worth the cost. This does not mean that Christians should avoid politics or the public sphere. Believers should take moral stands on issues that matter to God. However, they should exercise caution and discernment in how they do so, living as wise agents of Christ’s kingdom.

Salt and Light

One of Jesus’ best-known teachings contains dual metaphors for Christian engagement with the world. “You are the salt of the earth,” He said, and “You are the light of the world” (Matthew 5:13–14). In the right measure, salt improves what it touches. Similarly, Christians improve their environment. Consider this test for valid Christian engagement: *Does our influence make our environment better or worse?*

Modern readers may more easily understand Jesus’ light metaphor. He said, “Let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven” (Matthew 5:16). Jesus expects His followers to radiate goodness that dispels the darkness of evil. The light of their good works points to the Father—the Source of goodness. It elicits genuine praise for God from those who observe these acts of light. Consider another key test for Christian engagement: *Are people drawn to God by our public actions and disposition, or are they turned off?*

Love of God and Others

Jesus was asked, “Of all the commandments, which is the most important?” (Mark 12:28). He offered a simple and comprehensive answer: Love God with all your being and love others as if they were you. Love is not an add-on; the characteristic of love defines those living an authentically Christian faith (John 13:35).

First Corinthians 13 provides the best description of love in the Christian community. This list of love’s characteristics mirrors actions in every sphere of life, including public life. Biblical love raises another question: *How does our participation in politics and other civic duties reflect the criteria of love, regardless of our intentions?*

The Role of the Holy Spirit

All Christians should seek the Holy Spirit’s guidance when engaging in civic and political matters. Every aspect of Christian life depends on the Holy Spirit. As in the life of Jesus, the Holy Spirit must play a central role in guiding, facilitating, and empowering believers’ private and public lives. Christians engaged in the work of citizenship on their own risk the peril faced by the Galatians. They attempted to complete God’s work in the energy of the flesh (Galatians 3:3). We must also resist the urge to misuse a spiritual gift to earn political approval. To do so would make one no better than the court prophets of Jeremiah’s day, who only prophesied in favor of the king. *Are we living as citizens according to the Spirit’s fruit and gifts (Galatians 5:22–23; 1 Corinthians 12, etc.)?*

Conclusion

Scripture does not single out one detailed model for Christian participation in civic and political spheres. As “the infallible, authoritative rule of faith and conduct,”⁵ the Bible does offer powerful truths that should guide Christians’ civic and political lives. Throughout history, Christians have responded as best they could, in different political circumstances, as they sought to be faithful to the Bible in their unique contexts. From this important discussion comes the following summation for careful consideration.

Believers must be mindful of their core identity as people of another kingdom.

Allegiance to Christ as the only Lord and the defining role as His witnesses is crucial. As Christians act in love and as salt and light, under the guiding power of the Holy Spirit, they lead others to God, proclaim the gospel, and improve the world around them.

Modern political movements are not centered around God's destiny for humanity but rather focus on their ends. Further, they achieve those ends through power plays that rely on the successful domination of others rather than cooperation with the Holy Spirit.

In practical terms, as followers of Christ and ministers of the gospel, we should:

1. prioritize the gospel and its propagation far above personal and political allegiances;
2. become involved in one's community as a mandated participant as God's agent of reconciliation;
3. be cautious of what one attaches to the Church, ministries, and, most importantly, the name of Christ through preaching and teaching;
4. be clear about allegiance, identity, and witness by distinguishing the teaching of Scripture from personal opinions;
5. exercise discernment with political alliances, knowing that no party or political system fully aligns with Scripture and is therefore unworthy of unquestioned allegiance;
6. exert caution in how one advocates for things held to be true, knowing there is accountability for motives, outcomes, and conduct in the process;
7. engage others in a winsome and polite manner so that even those who disagree will be open to hearing the gospel (Titus 2:8);
8. continually evaluate political and social engagement based on the Holy Spirit's leading and the attributes of biblical love. As advised by the *Pentecostal Evangel* in the late twentieth century, Assemblies of God members should "not confuse secular political activity with the purpose of the Church, nor campaigning with witnessing and preaching. Do not make slanderous or false accusations against your opponents; maintain your integrity. Do not consider a brother or sister who is of like precious faith an adversary if he or she holds a different political view."⁶ When a political view demands a denial of our faith, however, we must stand for the faith against such a view.
9. unequivocally affirm the dignity of all, knowing that the heart of God longs for the salvation of all people; and
10. avoid any nationalism or identity politics that elevates political identities and obscures a primary allegiance to Christ. Such conduct is divisive, potentially idolatrous, and leads away from the Assemblies of God's mission to evangelize the lost, worship God, disciple believers, and show compassion, as expressed in Articles 10 and 11 of the [Statement of Fundamental Truths](#).

Notes

1. All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV®. Copyright ©1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.® Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. www.zondervan.com.
2. Assemblies of God Statement of Fundamental Truths, “1. The Scriptures Inspired.”
3. See William D. Mounce, *Mounce’s Explanatory Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words*, s.v. “world.”
4. See *Five Views on the Church and Politics, Counterpoints: Bible and Theology*, ed. Amy E. Black (Zondervan, 2015).
5. [Assemblies of God Statement of Fundamental Truths, “1. The Scriptures Inspired.”](#)
6. “10 Guidelines for Christian Voters,” *Pentecostal Evangel*, October 14, 1984, 13. Full text: “1. Do not confuse patriotism, national pride, and Western culture with Christian faith and practice. 2. Do not confuse secular political activity with the purpose of the church nor campaigning with witnessing and preaching. 3. Do not make slanderous or false accusations against your opponents but maintain your integrity. Do not consider a brother or sister who is of like precious faith an adversary if he or she holds a different political view. 4. At all times endeavor to verify information before accepting it as true or before repeating it to others. 5. At all times endeavor to know and understand the candidate’s positions and evaluate him or her on the basis of his or her ability to perform the duties and function of the office and his or her integrity. 6. At all times endeavor to know and understand the issues; do not excuse yourself from this duty by saying, “God will show me whom to vote for.” 7. At all times compare a candidate’s position with Scripture but only where the Scripture addresses the issue; do not force Scripture to address issues that the Author did not intend it to address. 8. Neither vote nor work for a candidate merely because he or she professes to be of the Christian faith. 9. Do not neglect your family, worship, prayer, or Bible study. 10. At all times uphold your leaders in prayer.”

NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION® AND NIV® ARE REGISTERED TRADEMARKS OF BIBLICA, INC. USE OF EITHER TRADEMARK FOR THE OFFERING OF GOODS OR SERVICES REQUIRES THE PRIOR WRITTEN CONSENT OF BIBLICA US, INC.

POSITION PAPER ON THE DOCTRINE OF CREATION

(Adopted by the General Presbytery in session August 2010. Revised by the General Presbytery in session August 2014.)

“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” (Genesis 1:1).

The Bible begins with the story of creation, declares at the outset that God is the Creator, and reiterates this understanding of origins from Genesis to Revelation. The Bible’s teachings on creation clearly are foundational to Christian faith.

In studying the biblical doctrine of creation, it should be understood that the Bible makes no claim to be a scientific textbook. Nor should the Bible, which is intended to communicate to people throughout the ages, be expected to utilize modern scientific terminology. Nonetheless, the Bible declares itself to be trustworthy in whatever it teaches to be true, whether relating to matters of faith, history, or the created order. “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness” (2 Timothy 3:16). We affirm with Jesus the authority, certainty, and finality of God’s eternal Word, for “Scripture cannot be broken” (John 10:35, NASB; Matthew 5:18).

God Is Creator of Everything

In the Genesis creation narratives, and throughout the Old and New Testaments, the Bible emphasizes that God is Creator, not only of the earth and its inhabitants, but of everything that exists (Exodus 20:11; Nehemiah 9:6; Psalm 146:6; Acts 14:17; Revelation 4:11; 10:6).

The Bible story stands in sharp contrast to ancient Near East thought that tended to be dualistic, teaching that the universe in some form existed eternally alongside the gods.

In ancient mythologies, the gods created certain things but always from preexisting materials. However, the biblical declaration that God is the Creator of everything sets Him apart from these pagan gods and their idols (Psalm 96:5).

More recent materialists also tend to believe that matter is eternal and the sum total of all existence. Consequently, evolutionary theory assumes that the universe and all life forms, including humans, are evolving spontaneously through mechanistic forces, unguided by any external intelligence, divine or otherwise.

Over against these beliefs, the Bible assumes and plainly teaches that God existed before all things (Psalm 90:2). Moreover, He brought the universe into existence out of nothing (*ex nihilo*), that is, without preexisting materials (Romans 4:17; Hebrews 11:3). Belief in the eternality of matter and the theory that the universe evolved on its own are therefore inconsistent with, and, indeed antagonistic to, biblical faith.

The Reality of Creation

Chapters 1 and 2 of Genesis accurately communicate God's creation of the heavens and the earth. Using language that appears to employ both prose and poetry, and that contains both literal and symbolic elements, the story is a simple, yet beautiful and compelling, narrative intended to speak to people in all ages.

The intricate design and delicate balance of creation is so complex that humans will never fully comprehend it—only the Creator himself can do so. But the message that God alone is Creator plainly has been communicated to all who through the ages hear and read the Genesis account. The simplicity, power, and beauty of these creation narratives contrast vividly with competing pagan myths from the ancient Near East.

Some have contended that the first two chapters of Genesis are poetical and are to be taken as parables. But a comparison of poetical references to creation (Deuteronomy 32, 33; Job 38:4–11; Psalms 90; 104:5–9) shows that the Genesis account is in prose form, though it may contain some poetic language. Even so, poetry in the Bible, as in

other literature, often describes actual, historical events, so the use of poetry does not make this account fictional.

Only God Can Create

It is also evident that no part of God's creation, angel or human, is creative in the sense God is. The Hebrew word for "create" (*bara'*) always has God as the subject of the verb. This word is used for God's work of creation and is also used to indicate that God will do something unusual and unprecedented. For example, it is used when God said to Israel at Sinai: "I will do wonders never before done [*bara'*, "created"] in any nation in all the world" (Exodus 34:10).

The significance of the Hebrew verb *bara'* is also illustrated when God spoke through Isaiah to his stubborn people, "From now on I will tell you of new things ... They are created [*bara'*] now, and not long ago" (Isaiah 48:6–7). As in the first chapter of Genesis, the word *bara'*, "to create," is used only of completely new and unprecedented acts of God; that is, of the creation of the heavens and the earth in the beginning, of the creation of the first animal life in the sea (1:21), and of man and woman in God's own image (1:27). At other times, the words "made" (*'asah*) and "formed" (*yatsar*) are used. So the word "create" (*bara'*) emphasizes that God alone is the Great Creator of all.

Creation Is Purposeful

God had a stated purpose in creation. He created "for his own ends" (Proverbs 16:4) and for His glory (Isaiah 43:7). He "formed [the earth] to be inhabited" by his own animate creatures (Isaiah 45:18). All creation is thus an expression of His will and His power.

Moreover, order, progress, and climax are all woven into the biblical account of creation. Order is seen in the careful structuring of the various stages of creative activity in a six-day format, evening to morning. Progress can be seen in the sequential development and filling out of the earth and its inhabitants, and in the increase of personal attention

God gave to His creative work. Of the vegetation we read that God said, “‘Let the land produce vegetation’ ... And it was so” (Genesis 1:11–12). Of the animals we read that God said, “‘Let the land produce living creatures’... And it was so” (vv. 24–25). But of the human race God, using strikingly personal and plural language, said, “‘Let us make mankind’ ... So God created mankind ... male and female he created them” (vv. 26–27). The human race is thus the capstone of God’s creative activity.

The biblical narratives intentionally show careful, intelligent planning and rules out the idea that any part of creation came into being by mere chance. God exercised His wisdom and control at all times (Psalms 136:5; 148:5; Isaiah 45:12; 48:12–13) and brought the entire created order to a complete and well-designed climax (Genesis 1:31).

The Nature of the Creator

It is important to note that Scripture focuses our attention not so much on the technical details of God’s creative activity as on the Creator himself. From Genesis 1:1 to 2:3, God’s presence and activity are primary. We read that “God created,” “God said,” “God saw,” God “separated,” “God called [named],” “God made,” “God set [placed],” “God blessed,” and God “rested.” The God of creation acted deliberately and decisively through His spoken word to bring about His intended purposes (Isaiah 55:10).

The creation accounts further show the Creator to be intelligent, loving, and personal. In contrast to pantheism, He is distinct from His creation (Psalm 90:2). In contrast to deism, He continues to be personally active in His creation. He upholds, sustains, and preserves it (Nehemiah 9:6) and, in His own time, will bring it to consummation (Romans 8:20–21; Colossians 1:16–17; 2 Peter 3:13; Revelation 20–21).

The relational nature of the Creator is seen in His fellowship with the first human pair and His expectations of all His human creatures. Humans are to worship and serve Him as the Creator (Isaiah 40:26,28,31). They are warned not to strive against their Maker (Isaiah 45:9). They are to commit the keeping of their souls to Him in well doing, as unto a faithful Creator (1 Peter 4:19). They are also to recognize that their help comes from

the One who made the heavens and the earth (Psalms 121:2; 124:8; 146:5–6), and in effecting His eternal purposes, there is nothing too hard for Him (Jeremiah 32:17).

A Work of the Trinity

The Bible also teaches that creation was a cooperative work of the Trinity. In addition to naming God [the Father] as Creator, the Old Testament shows that “the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters” (Genesis 1:2; Psalm 33:6–7). The New Testament further reveals that Jesus [the Son], who is the one Mediator between God and fallen humanity (1 Timothy 2:5), was the active Agent in creation, “For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth” (Colossians 1:16). This truth is also echoed in John’s Gospel, “Through him [Jesus, the Word] all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made” (John 1:3).

God’s Creation of Humans

The creation story depicts human beings as the zenith of God’s creative activity. Their uniqueness is portrayed in two separate and complementary accounts. Genesis chapter 1 is a terse overview of all creation while Genesis chapter 2 shows that God lavished very personal and particular attention on the creation of both Adam and Eve.

Significantly, it was only humans of whom God said, “Let us make mankind [“human being,” not exclusively “male”] in our image, in our likeness” (1:26), “so that they may rule ... over all the creatures” (1:26). Neither the previous inanimate or animate creation was so described. In those creative activities, God had simply said, “Let there be’...And it was so” (as in Genesis 1:6–7).

Being made in the image of God (Genesis 1:26–27), human beings are free, rational, capable of self-appreciation and self-expression, capable of moral and spiritual understanding, and created for fellowship with each other and with God. That the first human pair, made in God’s image, would fall and lead the race into sin (3:1ff.) was hardly a surprise for the Creator, who nonetheless purposed to create and redeem them through Christ. To be sure, the image of God divinely stamped on the race would be

marred by sin (Genesis 3). But Jesus Christ was destined “before the creation of the world” (1 Peter 1:20) to redeem fallen humankind and include His redeemed people in the final reconciliation of the universe (Romans 8:21; 1 Corinthians 15:20–28; Ephesians 1:4; Colossians 1:19).

While some think that the account of human creation is merely parabolic and not to be taken literally, Genesis pointedly declares God formed Adam from the dust of the earth and breathed into him the breath of life (2:7). Subsequently, God deliberately made Eve from Adam’s rib [perhaps “side”] (2:22). Both Adam and Eve, male and female, are declared to be made in the “image” and “likeness” of God. These carefully delineated creative acts indicate that humans are distinct from animals. God did not form Adam from some previously existing creature (1 Corinthians 15:39). Any evolutionary theory, including theistic evolution/evolutionary creationism, that claims all forms of life arose from a common ancestry is thereby ruled out.

Moreover, the New Testament treats the first Adam as a historical person (Romans 5:14; 1 Corinthians 15:45; 1 Timothy 2:13–14). Adam is named as the first human in Luke’s genealogy (Luke 3:38) and Jesus pointed out, authoritatively citing Genesis 1:27, that “at the beginning, the Creator ‘made them male and female’” (Matthew 19:4; Mark 10:6). Paul spoke of Adam and Jesus as historical persons, recognizing Adam as the beginning of the human race. “For Adam was formed first, then Eve” (1 Timothy 2:13). “[T]he first man Adam became a living being” (2 Corinthians 15:45) and “a pattern of the one [Christ] to come” (Romans 5:14), thus definitively linking Adam with Christ, “the last Adam.” Adam is the “one man” by whom sin and death came (Romans 5:12; 1 Corinthians 15:22). Jude 14 also cited Adam as the beginning of the race.

We strongly affirm that Adam and Eve were real, historical persons whose fall into sin (Genesis 3) is likewise historical. Both their and our redemption is historically effected through Christ, the “second Adam.” To suggest that Adam is not a historical person uniquely created by God may well diminish vital biblical teachings on the nature of humankind, their fall into sin, and, perhaps, the nature of Christ himself.

Creation and Science

The discoveries of science have frequently been utilized by skeptics to question the accuracy of the biblical accounts. In response, believing scientists and biblical scholars consider no fundamental conflict to exist between God's Word and His works. The theories of scientists are routinely modified with the introduction of new evidence. But the Scriptures, properly interpreted, are always the final, unchanging authority for Christian faith.

Christians historically have believed that "all truth is God's truth." God reveals himself finally and authoritatively in the Scriptures, His special revelation. In a subsidiary but nonconflicting way, He also reveals himself in the general revelation of His created order. Not surprisingly, many scientists have observed that the universe is fine-tuned to be capable of supporting life. There are many constants, which differing even slightly, would make life as we know it impossible. These observations are consistent with the testimony of the ancient Psalmist, "The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they display knowledge. ... Yet their voice goes out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world" (Psalm 19:1–2,4).

Ultimately, then, when God's Word and God's Work are properly understood and taught by reverent scholarship, there is no disunity. "For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse" (Romans 1:20). God has revealed himself in such a way as to invite us into reverent exploration of His nature both through His Word and His work—the Bible and scientific exploration.

In conclusion, we affirm that God and God alone is the designer and creator of the universe and of life. The Bible from beginning to end identifies God as the Creator. "By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God's command, so that what is

seen was not made out of what was visible” (Hebrews 11:3). “For he spoke, and it came to be; he commanded, and it stood firm” (Psalm 33:9).

ALL SCRIPTURE CITATIONS, UNLESS OTHERWISE NOTED, ARE FROM THE NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION (NIV).

POSITION PAPER ON CHURCH MISSION AND PEACEMAKING

(Adopted by the General Presbytery in session August 1-3, 2015)

“Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness” (James 3:18, NIV).¹

The Assemblies of God considers peacemaking to be intrinsic to the Church’s mission. Our “priority reason for being” is: (1) “To be an agency of God for evangelizing the world” (Acts 1:8; Matthew 28:19–20; Mark 16:15–16); (2) “To be a corporate body in which man may worship God” (1 Corinthians 12:13); (3) “To be a channel of God’s purpose to build a body of saints being perfected in the image of His Son” (1 Corinthians 12:28; 14:12; Ephesians 4:11–16); and, (4) “To be a people who demonstrate God’s love and compassion for all the world” (Psalm 112:9; Galatians 2:10; 6:10; James 1:27).

Peace emanates from the very character of the Triune God who is “the God of peace” (Romans 15:33). The gospel therefore is “The gospel of peace” which is proclaimed in evangelism (Ephesians 6:15), pervades the relational context of authentic worship, provides an essential ethos for building the body of Christ, and is expressed and extended by demonstrating God’s love and compassion for the world. God’s ultimate design for His world and all its inhabitants is and has always been for them to be at peace with Him, themselves, each other, and His creation.

Peace Disrupted

At the beginning of the human story, Adam and Eve enjoyed perfect peace in four relationships. They were at peace with God, their personal self, each other, and God’s created order. Through

these four relationships, God intended for humans to fulfill their purpose to worship and serve Him in a beautiful, hospitable, orderly, and peaceful world. However, when Adam and Eve yielded to temptation, followed their own desires, and rebelled against God, their sin damaged all four of these relationships, and humanity fell into depravity and strife. Thereafter, to this present time, and until Jesus Christ returns to establish His kingdom, fallen humanity has been, is, and will continue to be alienated from God, themselves, other people, and creation (Genesis 3:1–8). Peace is elusive where God’s Word and will are unknown or unheeded.

Hope for Peace Restored

In its most basic meaning, the word *peace* describes the quality of relationships. The Hebrew word *shalom*, usually translated “peace,” captures analogically what God’s peace is all about. It may best be understood as access to the “good life,” a life in which God’s good intentions for humanity are being realized. *Shalom* denotes the absence of conflict or war which is a necessary condition for human flourishing. But even more basically it speaks of harmony with God, oneself, one another, and God’s creation. *Shalom* therefore is a profoundly spiritual word, deeply rooted in the awareness that all blessings of life flow from God the Creator.

Its human and historical idealization is pictured in an oft-quoted passage from Israel’s “golden age”: “During Solomon's lifetime Judah and Israel, from Dan to Beersheba, lived in safety (*betach*), everyone under their own vine and under their own fig tree” (1 Kings 4:25). But as the biblical record makes clear, Solomon’s splendid and affluent kingdom by no means perfectly represented the mature *shalom* into which Israel’s God desired to bring His ancient covenant people and indeed all humankind (Micah 4:4).

Though the people whom God created were all too soon and too willingly alienated, the promise of a final and perfect realization of *shalom* is nonetheless found throughout the Scriptures. Immediately following the Fall of our first parents is God’s promise that the seed of the woman would one day defeat the deceiver (Genesis 3:15). This promise is followed by God’s promise to Abraham and his descendents that “all peoples on earth will be blessed through you” (Genesis 12:3). Somewhat later God promises that the Messiah, a descendant of David, will come to

establish a kingdom of peace throughout the earth (2 Samuel 7:12–13; 1 Kings 8:20; 1 Chronicles 17:11–14; Isaiah 9:6–7; 11:10–16)

These conditions are beautifully and powerfully depicted in the Old Testament prophets as a time when nations will no longer war against one another (Isaiah 2:4) and all creation is at peace (Isaiah 32:17–18). God’s people will then finally have entered into the perfect *shalom* He intended from the beginning.

With righteousness he [the Branch, i.e., the Messiah] will judge the needy, with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth.

He will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth; with the breath of his lips he will slay the wicked.

Righteousness will be his belt and faithfulness the sash around his waist. The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together; and a little child will lead them. The cow will feed with the bear, their young will lie down together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox. The infant will play near the cobra’s den, and the young child will put its hand into the viper’s nest. They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain, for the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea (Isaiah 11:4–9).

The New Testament continues this theme, often reflecting the language of the Old Testament prophets, and likewise declares that God’s eternal kingdom (Psalm 145:13) of peace will be established on the earth. But it will only come at the end of this present age when Jesus Christ returns as “King of kings and Lord of lords” (Revelation 19:11–16). The Revelation vividly depicts the arrival of a millennium, a thousand-year reign of peace (Revelation 20:4–10) which then gives way to the new heaven and the new earth (Revelation 21). It also describes the descent of the City of God at which time God comes eternally to dwell in righteousness and peace with His people (Revelation 21:1 through 22:5).

“Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. ‘He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death’ or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.” (Revelation 21:3–4)

Present Need for Peacemaking

Unfortunately, from the fall of Adam and Eve until the present, peace on our fallen planet has continued to be fragile indeed. Human history, to be sure, has its finer moments with the emergence of lofty ideals, many realized extensively in the history of our own and other nations, past and present. But unfortunately human history is also littered with the memories of wars, tyrannical and corrupt regimes, lawlessness, murder, slavery, even genocide. Far from our having evolved into a kinder, gentler world, the dawning of the twenty-first century is brimming with a simmering mix of ancient barbarities, militant religions, and godless philosophies that seem perennially to threaten whatever moral progress has been accomplished in previous generations.

Moral turbulence notwithstanding and with all the more reason, the Scriptures reiterate again and again the imperative of peacemaking for every generation. Dark ages and dark days are no reason for followers of Christ to cease faithful representation of the Prince of Peace! Even so, with all realism, the New Testament anticipates that turmoil will continue, and indeed increase as the end of the age approaches. In 2 Timothy 3:1–5, Paul predicts “terrible times” that will characterize many of the “last days.” Among his descriptors of human depravity are such terms as “lovers of themselves (selfish),” “unforgiving,” and “treacherous,” all of which specifically identify characteristics that militate against peace and justice and often corrupt humankind’s best intended efforts toward those ends. The Church in our time, and every time, has both the imperative and the challenge of pursuing peace and justice in societies often tumultuous and conflicted. Great revivals of Christian faith and morals have often turned the tide of human history, and that possibility is always with those who believe and act on their faith.

Biblical Directives for Peacemaking

The Scriptures are replete with directives to make peace in the midst of injustice and turmoil. The Psalmist proclaims: “Turn from evil and do good; seek peace and pursue it” (Psalm 34:14). The great writing prophets of the Old Testament severely condemned the dreadful social exploitation and injustice of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah in their prosperous but declining years. Thus Amos confronted an outwardly religious but idolatrous and oppressive Israel:

Away with the noise of your songs! I will not listen to the music of your harps. But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream! (5:23–24).

Similarly, Isaiah shortly thereafter confronted Judah, also outwardly religious but publicly corrupted by injustice and idolatry:

Stop doing wrong. Learn to do right; seek justice.

Defend the oppressed.

Take up the cause of the fatherless; plead the case of the widow (1:16–17).

As we know very well, for the most part those appeals fell on deaf ears, and both nations continued their blind march to disintegration and exile.

By the time of Jesus, God’s people were no longer a theocracy ruled by a Davidic king, but a vassal state ruled by tyrannical Rome. In that oppressive setting, with the Jewish people seething with resentment and revolt, Jesus yet preaches the prophetic message, “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God” (Matthew 5:9). Paul writes, “Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone” (Romans 12:17–18). Later in the same epistle he urges, “Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification” (Romans 14:19). The author of Hebrews commands: “Make every effort to live in peace with everyone and to be holy” (Hebrews 12:14). James promises, “Peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness” (James 3:18).

When Jesus blesses those who make peace (Matthew 5:9), He is challenging and encouraging His followers to actively promote the restoration of relationships. To believers deeply involved in the life of local congregations, Paul writes, “Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace” (Ephesians 4:3). This is an exhortation rarely heeded in fractious congregations and communities! Nonetheless, peacemaking and peacekeeping are a vital part of the “ministry of reconciliation” that God has given to us through Christ (2 Corinthians 5:18).

It is inspiring to remember that these exhortations first came to believers striving to be peacemakers under far more dangerous and difficult conditions than exist in advanced modern societies. But even today, there are many places in our world where extremely dangerous conditions threaten the very lives, not to mention the peacemaking efforts of believers. Certainly, for those of us who are free and uniquely empowered to bring reconciliation and hope to various communities at home and abroad, the imperative for peacemaking is inescapable.

Biblical Means of Achieving Peace

As we have repeatedly emphasized, genuine peace comes only from and through God who is the wellspring of peacemaking. As Paul notes (Romans 4:5; 5:6), God has taken the first step of peacemaking by offering redemption through Jesus Christ, whereby we have “peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ” (Romans 5:1). This includes personal and experiential peace: “And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 4:7). Jesus further personalizes it declaring that He is the One who gives peace: “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you” (John 14:27). Taking this reconciling gospel of peace (Ephesians 6:15) to others in turn is the first and most basic means of peacemaking (Matthew 5:9).

Beyond sharing the gospel of peace, the Scriptures are not univocal regarding other means of accomplishing peace or addressing conflict. In the Old Testament, God’s will for human behavior is epitomized in the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:1–17; Deuteronomy 5:1–21) which are in turn distilled into two, love for God and love for neighbor (Deuteronomy 6:5; Leviticus 19:18; Matthew 22:37–40). If necessary, force is used to resolve conflicts. In the New

Testament, there is more emphasis on accomplishing peace through nonviolent means. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus advocates a nonviolent response to evil when He instructs us to turn the other cheek, go the second mile, or relinquish our shirts when sued for our coats. However, the Scriptures strongly support conflict resolution as an appropriate method to obtain peace when one is wronged or has wronged another (Matthew 5:23–26; 18:15–20; 1 Corinthians 6:1–11, Ephesians 2:14).

The New Testament also recognizes and affirms the role of government in peacemaking and peacekeeping. “The authorities that exist have been established by God” and are “God’s servant for your good.” These authorities “bear the sword” as “God’s servants, agents of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer” (Romans 13:1,4). While these biblical texts have no illusions about the moral impeccability of the authorities or their actual rule, it is clear that the divine mandate for government is to maintain justice and peace, and to defend against and punish evil.

Christians have an imperative not only to affirm their government’s role in peacekeeping but also as citizens to cast their ballots, raise their voices, and exert their influence to facilitate just and humane actions by their governing bodies as well as other social and commercial entities.

Evangelical witness is always demonstrated as compassionate and peace-loving people thoughtfully and prayerfully examine their own prejudices, educate themselves on the great moral issues of the day, and engage in ways that bring glory to God and *shalom* to those who are oppressed and violated. Indeed, lawless and brutal behavior threatens the well-being and peace of society at large as well as particular individuals who are immediately abused by such destructive behaviors. Leaving the wounded unattended and unprotected alongside the highways of life may be excused by some religionists, but it is hardly the godly option for those called to be peacekeepers and peacemakers.

Assemblies of God Emphasis on Peacemaking

While the Scriptures place a great deal of responsibility for justice and peacemaking on leaders and government, the peacemaking imperative is also deeply and intensely personal—and must always have a personal starting point. One’s life-changing personal peace with God is to radiate

outwardly in both effecting and maintaining peace in the family, with fellow believers, the immediate community, and among all the structures and ministries of the Church at home and abroad. As recipients of peace, believers are to exemplify, create, and maintain just and peaceful contexts in their various spheres of life and ministry.

For both personal and corporate engagement in peacemaking, the Assemblies of God provides a wide range of resources and missions opportunities. In addition to well-established and well-funded missions organizations at home and abroad, rationale and encouragement are provided in various perspective papers as those on capital punishment, counseling, environmental protection, and justice for women in society, and the church. In a perspective paper on human trafficking, holistic instructions are provided for churches to respond to this systemic injustice, including prayer, education awareness, speaking out against this atrocity, and personal ministry to victims. Also, clear justification and instruction are provided in a perspective paper on civil disobedience that encourages nonviolence as the appropriate response to counter social evils. Another example is found in Resolution 9 of the 1989 General Council, which states: “The General Council . . . approves participation in the pro-life movement by all scriptural means and disapproves all unscriptural acts by its ministers; and leaves to the discretion of individual ministers the extent to which they may participate in nonviolent and peaceful acts of intervention to prevent the ‘killing of the unborn.’”

The Assemblies of God’s position on war must be clarified in any discussion of peacemaking. The official perspective paper on war and conscientious objection makes it clear that, “The Assemblies of God as a Movement deplores war. Therefore we are committed to its avoidance as much as accountability, sensibility, and responsibility allow. This will be the necessary posture, until the Prince of Peace, Jesus Christ, establishes His reign over a world that is now characterized by violence, wickedness, and war.” At the same time, this perspective paper goes on to cite Article XVII of the Church’s Bylaws which makes it clear that the Church is not pacifistic: “We shall continue to insist, as we have historically, on the right of each member to choose whether to declare their position as a combatant [one who willingly serves in positions of violence], a noncombatant [one who serves only in nonviolent ways], or a conscientious objector

[one who refuses to participate in any form of military service because of personal convictions regarding war].”

Moreover, the perspective paper also cites the following from Bylaws XVII: “As a Movement we affirm our loyalty to the government of the United States in war or peace.” Thus, while respecting the freedom of conscience of pacifists and encouraging their proper pursuit of peacemaking, the Assemblies of God also recognizes biblical authorization of police and military power for the safety and security of the country (Romans 13:1–5). Given these commitments, it is possible for believers of whatever persuasion in times of armed conflict to effectively serve as peacemakers in a place and role of their conscientious choice.

Evangelism and Peacemaking

In view of the admonitions of Scripture to pursue peace in a broken world, the importance and relevance of deliberate peacemaking activities is abundantly clear. In keeping with its inclusion of compassion ministries in its “priority reason for being” statements, the Assemblies of God, as noted, provides encouragement and opportunities for its members to be proactive in peacemaking. As people of the Spirit, we have seen again and again the way in which God raises up gifted believers to spearhead the formation of powerful peacemaking ministries at home and abroad. Examples readily come to mind, as Teen Challenge, Convoy of Hope, military and civilian chaplaincy ministries, and many others local, national, and international.

Unfortunately, history also reveals that at times individuals and churches, even entire denominations, make social justice and peacemaking activities their primary mission. Not uncommonly, these well-intentioned transformation movements that began with lofty Christian ideals are co-opted along the way by political or ideological interests and lose their moorings in the gospel of Christ. Unwittingly, they may even become a part of the oppressive systemic structures they initially set out to reform.

That being true, the emphasis and function of peacemaking and other social ministries must always be kept in proper relationship to the Church’s core mission to evangelize and make disciples of Jesus Christ. While ministries of compassion, social transformation, and

peacemaking that truly grow out of and retain their vital connection to the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ do indeed extend the mission of our God in His world, there must be a determined effort to stay on mission.

From its beginning in 1914, the Assemblies of God's main focus of ministry has been, and continues to be, worldwide evangelism and discipleship. This priority is drawn from the overall thrust of the New Testament and especially from the Lord's final command: "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father

and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age" (Matthew 28:19–20).

Conclusion

While evangelism and discipleship must always be the foremost task of the Church, the people of God cannot stand aside from the social evils and injustices of our time, about which the Bible speaks so powerfully. As we preach the gospel of peace about the miracle-working, life-giving Prince of Peace, we must be alert to the brokenness and systemic evils of the world around those to whom we minister. If we are prayerful and willing, our Lord by His Spirit will lead us through all our ministries to be peacemakers (Matthew 5:9), to help the needy (Matthew 25:35–36), and to minister in love and compassion endeavoring to obey everything He commanded.

NOTES

1. All biblical citations unless otherwise indicated are from the New international Version (2011).

POSITION PAPER ON DIVINE HEALING

(Adopted by the General Presbytery in session August 9-11, 2010)

From its inception the General Council of the Assemblies of God has recognized divine healing for the whole person as an important part of the gospel, the good news, which Jesus commissioned His disciples to proclaim. The Assemblies of God constitution in its Statement of Fundamental Truths, section 12, states, “Divine healing is an integral part of the gospel. Deliverance from sickness is provided for in the Atonement, and is the privilege of all believers (Isaiah 53:4,5; Matthew 8:16,17; James 5:14–16).”¹

Though it is impossible in a brief paper to cover all the implications of this statement or answer all the questions that are raised concerning it, we shall attempt to show that the statement is scripturally sound.

I. Divine Healing Is an Integral Part of the Gospel

The ministry of both Jesus and the apostles gives evidence that divine healing was integral to the proclamation of the gospel message. It was an important witness to Jesus as the revelation of the Father, the promised Messiah, and the Savior from sin (see John 10:37,38). The Bible shows a close connection between the healing ministry of Jesus and His saving, forgiving ministry. His power to heal was actually a witness to His authority to forgive sins (Mark 2:5–12). Frequently the gospel writers testify that His healing miracles parallel His preaching of the gospel, both being the purpose of His ministry (Matthew 4:23; 9:35,36).

People came from all directions both to hear Him and to be healed (Luke 5:15; 6:17,18). He never turned any away but healed all varieties of sicknesses, diseases, deformities, defects, and injuries (Matthew 15:30,31; 21:14). He also delivered people from demons and the problems they caused (Matthew 4:24).

Jesus recognized that sickness is ultimately the result of the fall of humans into sin, and in some instances may be linked to specific sin (John 5:14) or to the activity of Satan (Luke 13:16). He recognized also, however, that sickness is not always the direct result of specific sin (John 9:2,3). There were times when it was rather an opportunity for God to be glorified (Mark 2:12).

Miracles of healing were an important part of the works God sent Jesus to do (John 9:3,4). This is in line with the Old Testament revelation of God as the Great Physician, the Lord who heals (Exodus 15:26; Psalm 103:3, where the Hebrew participles used in both cases indicate it is God's nature to heal). Jesus' ministry showed that divine healing is still a vital part of God's nature and plan.

Healings also helped to identify Jesus as the promised Messiah and Savior. Jesus fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah 53:4: "Surely he took up [lifted and took away] our infirmities and carried [as a heavy load] our sorrows." ("Infirmities," *choli*, is the same word used of physical sickness and disease in Deuteronomy 28:59,61; 2 Chronicles 16:12; 21:15,18,19; Isaiah 38:9. "Sorrows," *makob*, is the same word used of physical pain in Job 33:19.) Matthew, in the account of Jesus' healing of Peter's mother-in-law, sees this Isaiah passage fulfilled in the healing ministry of Jesus: "This was to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet Isaiah: 'He took up our infirmities and carried our diseases' " (Matthew 8:17).²

Isaiah also ties the sufferings of the Servant to the provision of salvation, a ministry fulfilled by Jesus (Isaiah 53:5,6). His sufferings were for our sins and lead to our peace with God: "And by his wounds we are healed" (Isaiah 53:5). The Isaiah context and the reference to it in 1 Peter 2:24,25 emphasize especially the healing or restoration from sin. However, in view of the emphasis on physical sickness in Isaiah 53:4, it is clear that these passages teach that the gospel to be introduced by the Suffering Servant, Jesus, includes healing from both the spiritual and physical effects of the fall of the human race into sin recorded in Genesis 3.

When John the Baptist was imprisoned, he questioned whether Jesus was actually the promised Messiah or just another forerunner like himself. Jesus responded by calling attention to His messianic works that linked miracles and the preaching of the gospel to the poor (Matthew 11:4,5). Again, healing was an important witness, an integral part of the gospel (Isaiah 61:1,2; Luke 4:18; 7:19–23).

Divine healing continued to be an integral part of the gospel through the ministry of the apostles and the Early Church. Jesus sent out the Twelve and the Seventy-two to preach and to heal the sick (Luke 9:2; 10:9). After Pentecost “many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles” (Acts 2:43). Luke wrote the Book of Acts as an extension of the story of what Jesus did and taught, not only through the apostles but through a Church filled with the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:1,8; 2:4).

The working of miracles, including divine healing, was not limited to the apostles. The promise of Jesus was to all believers (John 14:12–14) who would ask in His name (that is, those who recognize His authority and conform themselves to His nature and purposes). God used deacons such as Philip to preach and heal (Acts 8:5–7) and an otherwise unknown disciple, Ananias, to bring healing to Saul (Paul) (Acts 9:12–18).

The gospel message includes the provision of spiritual gifts through the Holy Spirit to the Church, among which are the gifts of healings (1 Corinthians 12:7). All of these gifts, including that of healing, continue to edify or build up the Church and offer hope to every believer. Moreover, James asserts that healing is a normal aspect of the regular meetings of the Church. Whenever the community of faith is gathered, anyone who is sick may request prayer for healing (5:14). We are assured that divine healing is an ongoing manifestation of the gospel in the current day, and will continue until the return of Jesus.

II. Divine Healing Is Provided in the Atonement

The ministry of the priests under the Law foreshadowed the ministry of the great High Priest, Jesus Christ, who is able “to sympathize with our weaknesses (astheneia,

weakness, sickness, disease, timidity, infirmity)" (Hebrews 4:14,15). The Old Testament priests, through the sprinkling of the blood of the sacrifices, made atonement for the sins of the people.

An examination of the concept of atonement in the Bible shows that in most cases it refers to a ransom price paid for redemption and restoration, which points to the redemption through Christ accomplished by the shedding of His blood in our behalf. The apostle Paul described it this way: "God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood" (Romans 3:25).

The phrase, "sacrifice of atonement," translates the Greek hilasterion, which can be also translated expiation, propitiation, atonement, or mercy seat. Leviticus 16 records God's expectations for Israel's Day of Atonement and the ministry of the high priest sprinkling the blood of a sin offering on the atonement cover (the solid gold lid on top of the ark of the covenant). The ark contained the stone tablets of the Law, which the people had broken. The broken Law called for judgment and death. But when the blood of a spotless lamb was sprinkled, prophetically anticipating the sinless life of Christ, God saw that sinless life instead of the broken Law and could give mercy and blessing.

The primary purpose of the atonement was cleansing from sin (Leviticus 16:30). It is also clear, however, that atonement brought release from the penalty and consequences of sin in order to bring restoration to God's blessing and favor. When the people of Israel complained after the judgment that followed the rebellion of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram, God sent a plague on the Israelites. Moses sent Aaron out into the midst of the congregation, where he made atonement for them, and the plague was stopped (Numbers 16:47,48). The Law of Moses required that when the men of Israel were numbered, they were each to give a half shekel atonement offering for their redemption and to prevent a plague from coming upon them (Exodus 30:11–16). Atonement thus provided cleansing from sin and its consequences, including sickness and disease.

The Bible makes it clear that people could not pay the price for their redemption, so God out of His love and for the glory of His own name provided the ultimate atonement (Romans 3:25; see also Psalms 65:3; 78:38; 79:9; Romans 3:21–28). All this was accomplished through Christ at Calvary (John 3:14–16). There He made a full atonement for the whole person. The New Testament speaks of this as redemption, which has essentially the same meaning as atonement. Through Christ we have received redemption and the forgiveness of sins (Romans 3:24; Ephesians 1:7; Colossians 1:14; Hebrews 9:15).

Redemption, accomplished through the atonement of Christ, provides reconciliation for sin and its consequences. Even where sickness is not the direct result of specific sin, it is still in the world because of sin. Therefore it is among the works of the devil Jesus came to destroy (1 John 3:8) and is thus included in the Atonement.

From the parallel between redemption and atonement, we see that provision for the healing of our bodies is part of the redemption spoken of in Romans 8:23. We receive the forgiveness of sins now in connection with the redemption of our souls. We shall receive the redemption of our bodies when we are caught up to meet the Lord and are changed into His likeness (1 Corinthians 15:51–54; 2 Corinthians 5:1–4; 1 John 3:2). Divine healing now is a foretaste of this, and, like all the blessings of the gospel, flows from the Atonement.

III. Divine Healing Is a Gift of God's Grace for All

Just as salvation is by grace through faith (Ephesians 2:8), so all God's blessings and gifts are ours by His grace, or unmerited favor. They cannot be earned or deserved. It should be noted that instead of demanding healing from Jesus, the New Testament records that people came asking for His compassionate ministry. They did not look on healing as their right, but as a gracious privilege extended to them.

That we cannot earn God's blessings, including divine healing, should make us realize the importance of cultivating our life in the Spirit, for the Spirit will "give life to your

mortal bodies,” and that is our real hope (Romans 8:11). In fact, even though outwardly we are wasting away, inwardly we are being renewed day by day (2 Corinthians 4:16).

It is this inner renewal that makes us best able to have the faith to receive the gift of divine healing. To the woman healed of her twelve-year-long bleeding, Jesus said, “Your faith has healed you” (Mark 5:34). Paul at Lystra, when he saw that listening to his preaching had brought faith to be healed into the heart of a cripple, commanded him to stand up (Acts 14:9,10). Faith is seen also in the Roman centurion who recognized the authority of Christ’s word for the healing of his servant (Matthew 8:5–13) and the Canaanite woman who believed in Jesus for the healing of her daughter (Mark 7:24–30; Matthew 15:28).

That divine healing comes through faith is further confirmed by the fact that unbelief hindered its reception at Nazareth (Mark 6:5,6) and at the foot of the Mount of Transfiguration (Matthew 17:14–20). James 5:15 promises that the prayer of faith offered for the sick by the elders of the church will make the sick well and the Lord will raise them up. Faith, then, receives healing through the simple Word of the Lord. But Jesus did not turn away from those who had little faith or who did not seem to express any faith at all. Those who are sick often find it is not easy to express faith, and Jesus did a variety of things to help them. Some He touched (Mark 1:41; 8:22), took their hands (Mark 1:31; Luke 14:4), or laid His hands upon them (Mark 6:5; 8:25; Luke 4:40; 13:13). Others He helped by a variety of acts, some of which called for faith and obedience on their part (Mark 7:33; 8:23).

Faith, however, had to be in the Lord, not in the means used to help them express their faith. This seems to be the reason for the great variety of means used, lest people get their eyes on the means rather than on God. Faith is trusting the all-wise, all-loving, and all-powerful God to respond to the cries of His creation in His own way.

The promise “anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing” is closely connected with prayer, asking in Christ’s name (John 14:12–14; 16:23,24). The usage of the name of Jesus is not a formula that can be used by humans to coerce the

response of God. His name is the revelation of His character and nature, which we have in us only if we abide in Christ and His words abide in us (John 15:7). As a consequence of this, His will becomes dominant in our lives, conforming our will to His. Thus, our requests in His name are increasingly according to His will, opening the avenue for His responding to our prayers.

The revelation of God as “the Lord, who heals you” (Exodus 15:26) cannot be limited to Israel. The healing of the centurion’s servant and the daughter of the Canaanite woman show that healing is the privilege of Gentiles also. In fact, there is healing for all who desire it and will respond to Jesus. There is evidence that God’s gift of healing can even be experienced by one before their sins have been dealt with, as in the case of the invalid at the Pool of Bethesda (John 5:2–9,14).

Belief in divine healing neither opposes nor competes with medical doctors. The knowledge and skills of this profession bring help to many. It is true that the Bible condemns King Asa because “even in his illness he did not seek help from the Lord, but only from the physicians” (2 Chronicles 16:12). But Asa had already sought for help from Syria in an act of unbelief and disobedience, refusing to rely on the Lord (2 Chronicles 16:7). The issue for which Asa is judged is not that he sought help from physicians but that he refused to seek the Lord.

When the woman who had been subject to bleeding for twelve years was healed, Mark records that “she had suffered a great deal under the care of many doctors and had spent all she had, yet instead of getting better she grew worse” (Mark 5:26). If it was wrong for her to go to physicians, this would have been the perfect place for Jesus to have said so, but He did not. Instead, He accepted the faith she expressed and commended her for it.

Jesus also sent the ten lepers whom He healed to show themselves to the priests (Luke 17:14). Under the Law the priests were in charge of diagnosis, quarantine, and health (Leviticus 13:2ff.; 14:2ff.; Matthew 8:4). Thus Jesus recognized that human diagnosticians have their place.

Through the skill and training of physicians recoveries and restorations do occur, a truth that does neither refute nor diminishes the belief in divine healing. We rejoice should God, who is the source of all healing, work through the doctors, give thanks to them for their dedication, and offer continual praise to God. With all their learning, training, and skill, doctors are still not the last word to be uttered in diagnosing human maladies. We steadfastly look to God who is more than able to bring healing even in situations deemed to be hopeless.

IV. Divine Healing Will Be Fully Realized When Jesus Returns

We are living at present between the first and second appearances of Jesus Christ. At His first coming He provided, through His life, death, and resurrection, atonement for sin and its consequences. In this era divine healing, a gift of God's grace, is seen as a proleptic expression of the complete redemption of the human body. At His second coming what was begun will be brought to completion—salvation from sin and all its effects will be realized. In this period of the “already and not yet” some are healed instantly, some gradually, and others are not healed.

The Bible indicates that until Jesus comes we groan because we have not yet received the full redemption of our bodies (Romans 8:23). Only when the dead in Christ rise and we are changed do we receive the new bodies which are like His glorious body (1 Corinthians 15:42–44, 51–54). Even followers of Christ groan and travail in pain like the rest of creation, waiting patiently for the fulfillment of our hope (Romans 8:21–25). In that the human body is described by Paul as a “temple of the Holy Spirit” (1 Corinthians 6:19), we must care for it and avoid that which would abuse it. But, no matter what we do for this body, no matter how many times we are healed, unless the rapture of the Church intervenes we shall die.

The promise and reality of divine healing does not rule out suffering for the sake of Christ and that of the gospel. We are expected to be prepared to follow His example (Hebrews 5:8; 1 Peter 2:19, 21; 4:12–14, 19). Nor are we to look to divine healing as a

substitute for obedience to the rules of physical and mental health. Jesus recognized the need of the disciples to get away from the crowds and rest awhile (Mark 6:31). Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, advised him to delegate some of his responsibilities so that he could stand the strain of leading Israel (Exodus 18:17,18).

Neither is divine healing a means of avoiding the effects of old age. Moses did retain a clear eye and his natural strength until the day of his death (Deuteronomy 34:7), but this privilege was not granted to King David (1 Kings 1:1–4). The gradual breakdown of old age, pictured so graphically in Ecclesiastes 12:1–7, is the common experience of believers as well as unbelievers. Healing is still available to the aged, but the part that is healed usually continues to age like the rest of the body. We do not yet have the redemption of the body.

It is possible that the refusal to alter one's lifestyle to accord with biblical principles could hinder healing (John 5:14). While the amount of faith is not always, as noted above, determinative, if one does not believe that divine healing can occur, it might not. We must also be open to God's will and activities, always designed by His love and for our good, understanding that they are beyond our immediate ability to understand. He is, by healing us now and by not healing us, moved by His great compassion, desiring that we be drawn increasingly closer to Him.

We recognize that there have been abuses regarding divine healing. Excessive claims and unfounded judgments are offered by some. But we must not let that cause us to retreat from a positive proclamation of the truth of the Scripture. Peter and John were able to say to the lame man who was to be healed, "What I have I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk" (Acts 3:6). May we, too, remain committed to the reality of the power of God to effect divine healing.

In humility we confess that we do not understand all that pertains to divine healing. We do not understand fully why some are healed and others are not, any more than we understand why God permitted James to be martyred and Peter delivered (Acts 12:1–19). Scripture makes it clear, however, that our part is to preach the Word, expecting

signs, including divine healing, to follow. Finally, at the Lord's return, "when the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality" (1 Corinthians 15:54), the full realization of divine healing will have come.

Notes

1. All biblical quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are from the New International Version (NIV).
2. "Infirmities," *astheneia*, denotes weakness and is often used to speak of sickness and disease (Luke 5:15; Acts 28:9); "Diseases," *nosos*, seems to be used synonymously with *astheneia* here to indicate physical disease or illness (see also, Matthew 4:23; 9:35; Luke 7:21; Acts 19:12).

POSITION PAPER ON DIVORCE AND REMARRIAGE

(Adopted by the General Presbytery in session, August 5-6, 2024)

Summary

Marriage between one man and one woman for a lifetime is the historic Christian standard based on the full witness of Scripture. The Assemblies of God holds marriage in such high regard that it only recognizes the right to divorce under a narrow set of biblically warranted exceptions. Where we recognize the right to divorce, we recognize the freedom to remarry. Even when those exceptions do not exist, divorced and remarried Christians belong to the people of God and should be treated as members of the body of Christ.

Introduction

In the United States, lifelong marriages are no longer the norm for families. One twenty-first-century study shows that about one-third of Americans who are or have been married have also been divorced at least once. Among self-professed evangelical

Christian believers, 25 percent reportedly have experienced divorce.¹ Vast segments of the general population live in families headed by single parents, either divorced or never married. Many others live in transient relationships marked by convenience or fear of legal entanglements. In short, many people today live contrary to God's design for the family, sexual relationships, and child rearing.

The Church must speak to the issues of divorce and remarriage, which occur all too often. Christians can struggle with how their commitment to Christ should shape their views of marriage, divorce, and remarriage.

Witness of Scripture

On Marriage

1. Marriage joins two sexes, male and female, who share in the divine image. Both males and females are biologically needed to be "fruitful and multiply" so that humanity can reflect God's authority over the earth (Genesis 1:27–28).

Marriage between two sexes should be a mutual relationship. After God placed man in the Garden to work it, He noted that man should not be alone. God created man's equal to work alongside him as an *ezer kenegdo*, or "ally in front of" (Genesis 2:18). *Ezer* is a Hebrew term that can mean "helper," "ally," or "rescuer." The Old Testament uses the term most often to describe God. *Kenegdo* is a Hebrew word that can mean "in front of" or "in sight of." It describes standing face-to-face or eye-to-eye. In this context, *ezer kenegdo* does not mean "junior partner" but "corresponding ally." Man immediately recognized his equal in woman compared to other living beings (Genesis 2:19–23).

Marriage is a lifetime union between two sexes. The story of woman's creation explains marriage as the moment man leaves his family of origin to become "one flesh" with his wife (Genesis 2:24). Jesus said of this union, "What God has joined together, let no one separate"² (Matthew 19:6).

2. Marriage is a covenant. It is a solemn, binding agreement made before God and among people in society. The marriage order of Genesis 2:24 strongly implies the nature of marriage. But Malachi 2:14 describes it as a covenant. Ezekiel 16:8 then extends the idea of marriage to the covenant relationship between God and Israel.

Marriage is a covenant between one man and one woman. While different roles exist for males and females in different cultures, the most significant difference between men and women is biological and is related to procreation. Only women can say, “With the help of the LORD I have brought forth” another human being (Genesis 4:1). The physical differences that exist between men and women do not negate the equal responsibility they share for their marriage.

3. The sexual consummation of marriage is for procreation, bonding, and mutual pleasure in a safe and loving relationship. Paul taught spouses to faithfully respect each other sexually (1 Corinthians 7:3–5).

Biblical marriage begins and ends with monogamy. The first story of the family focuses on one man and one woman. Some practiced polygamy later, but the resulting family experience was never ideal (e.g., Genesis 21:9–10; 37:2–36; 1 Samuel 1:1–8). Comparing Israel’s “one-God people” relationship with the institution of marriage (e.g., Isaiah 54:5, Hosea 3:1) led to an insistence on “one-spouse marriage” by the New Testament era.

Within the Church, Paul proscribed monogamy for leaders by his references to a “one-woman man” (1 Timothy 3:2, 12; Titus 1:6). Paul saw marriage as analogous to the relationship between Christ and the Church (Ephesians 5:21–33). Spouses’ faithfulness to each other’s well-being reflects the reconciled community Christ died for and for whom Christ will return.

On Divorce

1. God judged divorce as harmful (Malachi 2:14–16). Divorce was not a part of God’s original intention for humanity. Deliberately breaking the marital covenant hinders God’s purposes in marriage.

God's Law regulated divorce. The Law acknowledged that divorce was already taking place in Israel. In those times, women were under the authority of men. A husband could abandon his wife, without legal recourse, to starvation or prostitution on a mere whim. The Old Testament divorce law was a necessary hedge against mistreatment. The Law offered the possibility of divorce only under carefully prescribed circumstances (Deuteronomy 24:1–4; cf. 22:13–19, 28–29).

2. Jesus spoke against divorce (Matthew 19:5–6; Mark 10:6–9). In the conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees over divorce, the question concerned what qualified as “indecency” in Deuteronomy 24:1. Can a man divorce his wife for any cause or only for adultery? Jesus pointed out that Moses only permitted (epitrepo) them to divorce their wives—but even then, not for “every cause” (Matthew 19:3, 7–8). Jesus interpreted Deuteronomy 24:1–4 as a description of divorce happening in certain instances, not a command to divorce.

In the case of “marital unfaithfulness,” Jesus permitted divorce (Matthew 5:32; see also Matthew 19:9). The Greek word translated “marital unfaithfulness” in these passages is porneia, which would undoubtedly include adultery but is also a broader term for sexual immorality of various kinds, often habitual, both before and after marriage (Mark 7:21; Acts 15:20; 1 Corinthians 5:1; 6:18; Galatians 5:19; Ephesians 5:3; 1 Thessalonians 4:3).

When Jesus spoke against divorce, the concern was people finding any excuse to divorce one spouse to marry another. Divorce for the sake of remarriage constituted adultery in God's eyes unless porneia had already broken the marriage covenant.

3. Paul forbade Christian couples to divorce (1 Corinthians 7:10–11). Christian couples are to remain unmarried if they divorce unless they are reconciled to their believing spouse. Paul also forbade Christians from initiating divorce simply because their partner was an unbeliever. Suppose an unbelieving spouse wants to stay in the marriage to a believer. For Paul, the believer sanctifies (sets apart) their marriage and family by their presence as a follower of Jesus (1 Corinthians 7:12–14). In fact, the believing spouse's witness could lead to the salvation of the unbelieving spouse (1 Corinthians 7:16).

Paul allowed for divorce when an unbelieving spouse was unwilling to continue in marriage to a believer. In that case, the believer must let them go “to live in peace” (1 Corinthians 7:15). Just as marriage to an unbeliever can lead a family to Christ if the unbeliever wants to stay, forcing marriage on an unbeliever who wants to leave can disrupt the peace that the gospel promises to bring. In these cases, abandonment, by implication, provides grounds for divorce and remarriage.

In summary, marriage is a covenant between two partners, male and female, that God intends to last a lifetime. Marriages also create the potential for the birth and rearing of children. Two parents can better partner for the good of the children and the good of each other. There is no closer human relationship than marriage, so there is no better analogy for the relationship between God and His people or Christ and His Church. Marriage should reflect the loving community God intends for His people. God hates divorce among His people. It violates the covenant between wives and husbands as bearers of the divine image in their union. At the same time, God protected wives from mistreatment in cultures where husbands had more power to initiate divorce by prescribing narrow conditions in which divorce is allowable.

Jesus also offered protection from spouses looking to divorce for any reason. Jesus did allow for (though He did not command) divorce for marital unfaithfulness because one spouse has already broken the marriage covenant.

Paul also forbade divorce for Christians but provided for unbelievers who were bound in marriage with believers. If an unbeliever wants out, the believer must let the spouse go. As an implied abandonment, the marriage covenant is already broken again, so divorce must be permitted.

Jesus interpreted the Law by looking to the heart of the Law and not just the wording. Paul interpreted Jesus by looking to the heart of the gospel and not just the one exception Jesus discussed. Both Jesus and Paul allowed divorce when the marriage covenant was already broken. They also considered what protected members from

mistreatment in their discussions of divorce. While it takes two to marry, it may only take one to force a divorce. Christians are not responsible for divorces outside of their control.

The Assemblies of God recognizes exceptions for divorce and remarriage based on the above: adultery, abandonment of a believer by an unbeliever, domestic violence, and ecclesiastical annulment. The Assemblies of God also does not count preconversion divorce against the possibility of remarriage.³ Whatever has happened before conversion belongs to the old way of life. Preconversion divorce does not count as the failure of a Christian marriage.

Domestic abuse, whether of the spouse, children, or both, can also constitute a breaking of the marriage covenant.⁴ Spouses are to love and mutually submit to one another. Parents are to care for their children by the very act of becoming parents. No spouse should stay in an unsafe environment any more than a parent can disregard the suffering of their children. God's calling on us as stewards of our children and bodies is no less meaningful than God's calling on us as spouses. Based on Scripture, the Assemblies of God holds the abuser responsible for breaking the marriage covenant and not the one who may divorce to protect themselves or their children.

An ecclesiastical annulment is also a biblical exception, allowing for remarriage when the first marriage was not entered freely or honestly. If by force, fraud, or lack of consummation, a marriage may be annulled in recognition that there was no covenant between two willing parties with which to begin. At the same time, the person so defrauded is an innocent party to the failure of the marriage.

Divorced Christians and Remarriage

Concerning All Believers

The Law makes clear that divorce permitted remarriage. Deuteronomy 24:1–4 assumed the divorced woman (and former husband) would remarry. However, this passage

shows that the Law put certain limits on remarriage. A husband could not reclaim his rejected wife after her marriage to another man.

Jesus taught that divorce and remarriage, without biblical cause, was adultery. It constituted a sin against the covenant of the first marriage (Matthew 5:32; 19:9; Mark 10:11–12; Luke 16:18). In these passages, Jesus appeared to speak to those who willfully initiated divorce without having biblical grounds to do so. However, Jesus recognized that the fundamental problem is divorce itself and not remarriage.

Because Jesus included an exception on behalf of the innocent spouse, a married person who divorces a sexually immoral spouse does not commit adultery since the offender is already guilty of adultery. Nor does the innocent spouse commit adultery upon remarriage. Note that “marital unfaithfulness” or *porneia* often implies ongoing immorality. So, this exception is not a command to end a salvageable marriage.

Paul also included an exception on behalf of the innocent spouse when unbelieving spouses were unwilling to live with partners who had become believers (1 Corinthians 7:15). Paul does not encourage remarriage after divorce, but he also does not condemn it for innocent parties (1 Corinthians 7:27–28).

Remarriage establishes a new marriage covenant. Scripture makes it clear that spouses who sinfully break their marriage covenant to marry another commit adultery. Yet, Scripture never places such guilt on the innocent partner. Believers are only to remarry one who “belong[s] to the Lord” (1 Corinthians 7:39), and the new marriage covenant is to be permanent.

Due to a prior divorce, some churches may assess an individual’s suitability for various church leadership positions, such as teacher, elder, deacon, and board member. A proven successful remarriage, or a sufficient time past the divorce for those who remained single, could demonstrate that spiritual concerns stemming from the failed marriage no longer exist. A church may determine that, rather than a disqualifier, a healthy long-term remarriage qualifies as evidence of the level of maturity needed for

someone to hold a leadership position even outside of the previously mentioned exceptions for divorce.

Concerning Credentialed Ministers

Near the top of the list of requirements for the offices of elder or overseer (corresponding to a pastor) is that they shall be “the husband of one wife” (1 Timothy 3:2, 12; Titus 1:6, KJV⁵). In Greek, this reads literally “one-woman man.” Its exact meaning is elusive and has been subject to several interpretations. Some have argued that it literally means that leaders must be male and must be married to a woman (i.e., not single). The Assemblies of God rejects those interpretations and credentials women and singles, whether male or female.⁶

The more common question is whether this passage refers to one spouse at a time or one spouse for an entire lifetime. Does it mean that elders and deacons could not remarry after being widowed, could not remarry after being divorced, or, if married, must be married to one person only (i.e., no polygamy)? The General Council of the Assemblies of God has adopted the interpretation that the “one-woman man” restriction applies to individuals in a heterosexual, monogamous marriage for which divorce is not an option except under specific conditions. If those conditions do exist, remarriage becomes allowable for divorced ministers.

Those conditions must be exceptions that follow biblical teachings about marriage, conversion, and the value of human beings. This includes the allowance of remarriage when the divorce occurred prior to conversion (because we are now a “new creation”), as a result of the previous spouse’s sexual infidelity, because of abandonment of the believer, due to domestic violence aimed at a spouse or child, or in recognition of an ecclesiastical annulment due to fraud, willful lack of consummation, or lack of freedom or consent in entering the marriage.⁷

Guidelines

This paper aims to inform pastoral care and guidance for the people of God. The complexities of modern life prevent Scripture from including specific directions for every issue. Realizing we do not know how the apostles might have handled every problem raised by divorce and remarriage, we offer this paper in a sincere effort to affirm the truth of Scripture while endeavoring “to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace” (Ephesians 4:3).

The following principles and recommendations are offered for consideration:

1. All Christians need to hear regular and consistent instruction on the nature, permanence, and nurture of marriage. An uncompromising declaration of the sanctity of marriage must be articulated in ways that affirm and comfort the divorced and equip them to be successful in any new marriage that may have already been undertaken.
2. The victims of divorce, including children, need and deserve special care within Christian congregations and from trained caregivers.
3. The Church must also deal purposefully and uncompromisingly with professing believers who willfully violate their marital vows and engage in behaviors that destroy their marriage covenants.
4. Particular sensitivity is necessary for those caught in difficult marital circumstances not specifically addressed in Scripture. Believers enmeshed in these circumstances need careful guidance. Lead them through applying scriptural principles and prayer, so they make decisions consistent with Scripture and their consciences.

Notes

1. Barna Group, “The Trends Redefining Romance Today,” [February 9, 2017] <https://www.barna.com/research/trends-redefining-romance-today/> (accessed May 8, 2024).
2. Scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV®. Copyright ©1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.® Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. [zondervan.com](https://www.zondervan.com).
The “NIV” and “New International Version” are trademarks registered in the United States Patent and Trademark Office by Biblica, Inc.®
3. The bylaws of the Assemblies of God (Article IX. B, Section 5, paragraph b) allow for credentialed ministers to conduct a marriage for divorced believers if one of those five conditions applied in their divorce.

4. See the Assemblies of God position paper on “Domestic Violence” approved by the General Presbytery of the Assemblies of God in August 2022 at ag.org/Beliefs/Position-Papers/Domestic-Violence.
5. KJV refers to the King James Version of the Bible.
6. See the Assemblies of God position paper on “The Role of Women in Ministry” approved by the General Presbytery of the Assemblies of God in August 2010 at ag.org/Beliefs/Position-Papers/Women-in-Ministry.
7. The bylaws of the Assemblies of God (Article VII, Section 2, paragraph j and Article IX. B, Section 5, paragraph e) allow for credentialed ministers to divorce and remarry under those exceptions.

POSITION PAPER ON DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

(Adopted by the General Presbytery in session August 3, 2022)

The Assemblies of God affirms the intrinsic worth of every human being created in the image of God: “Man was created good and upright; for God said, ‘Let us make man in our image, after our likeness.’ However, man by voluntary transgression fell and thereby incurred not only physical death but also spiritual death, which is separation from God (Genesis 1:26, 27; 2:17, 3:6; Romans 5:12–19).”¹

Because of the fallen condition of humanity, domestic violence exists today as commonplace in society. Statistics reveal that every minute of every day in the United States, an average of twenty persons experience violence in their relationship with their domestic partner. On average, domestic violence call centers receive twenty thousand calls every day.² These alarming numbers highlight the seriousness of this expression of human sin against spouses and children. The Assemblies of God must decry such actions in the strongest and clearest of terms.

God calls the Church not only to speak out against domestic violence but to also minister to both the abused and the abuser, albeit differently. The gospel of Christ stands as the power of God to forgive, heal, restore, protect, and empower for righteous living.

In response to the scourge of domestic violence in society, churches and parachurch organizations have established social agencies to help combat the crisis. As the Church addresses the issue of domestic violence, it must do so based on a solid foundation drawn from the Word of God, which reveals a strong position against domestic violence.

God's Original Intent, Its Corruption, and Restoration

The biblical account of Creation provides vital information about the plans and purposes of the Creator. These insights provide the foundation for a biblical understanding of the sin of domestic violence.

God created humanity “in his own image;” “male and female he created them” (Genesis 1:27). He gave humans the responsibility to rule “over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground” (Genesis 1:26, 27). Humans were not granted rulership over one another.

Genesis 2 reveals that “it is not good for the man to be alone,” so God created woman as a “helper suitable for him” (Genesis 2:18). The role of a helper exists not as a subservient one but rather that of an indispensable partner in God’s mission for humanity. The role of helper implies a mutual and equal partnership rather than a subservient relationship.

Although men and women each possess formal and functional differences, God has planned that neither need express control and domination over the other. Men and women were to complement each other and serve His purposes with unity and equality, as expressed in the Genesis description of marriage: the two unite to each other and “become one flesh” (2:24).

Marriage vows in Israel included the provision of food, clothing, sexual intimacy, and faithfulness (Exodus 21:10–11; Deuteronomy 24:1–4). The New Testament does not abrogate these provisions but rather reinforces them (Matthew 19:1–9; Mark 10:1–12;

1 Corinthians 7:1–16; 1 Timothy 5:8). The basic principles of marital vows as supported in the New Testament, then, include material support and physical affection. Violation of these vows could extend to physical and emotional abuse—both justification for dissolving the marriage relationship.

Despite God’s design and plan, the entrance of sin (Genesis 3) conflicted with that plan and opened humans to the evil of desire for domination over others. Although God created marriage to be an intimate and enriching relationship, sin corrupted that relationship. In Genesis 3, God declares the tragic results of sin: this most important relationship will be plagued by selfishness, frustration, and conflict. Here, God does not *prescribe* what their new conduct should be, but rather *describes* the nature of ongoing human struggle because of sin.

In Jesus Christ, God provided the way for humanity to align with His plan for how to treat one another. Jesus illustrates this by washing the feet of His disciples (John 13:4–15), teaching them that as He came to serve, so should they serve one another. Paul also notes that for children of God through faith in Jesus, “there is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28). The work of Jesus has rendered the desire for domination over others futile.

Paul further emphasizes the power of the gospel to reverse the effects of sin by using the marriage relationship as an example (Ephesians 5:21–33; Colossians 3:18–21). Peter affirms Paul’s message in 1 Peter 3:1–7. Paul introduces his teaching with a powerful principle: “submit to one another out of reverence for Christ” (Ephesians 5:21). He calls for both partners in the marriage to exemplify mutual submission. To the wives he says, “submit yourselves to your own husbands,” and to the husbands, he says, “love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her” (Ephesians 5:22, 25). This clear exhortation allows for no expressions of domestic violence in the marriage. The challenge to love one’s wife as Christ loved the Church

demands that husbands treat wives with respect and not abuse or mistreat them in any way. The relationship and responsibility described here is mutual.

God's ultimate plan entails humans living in harmony and unity without any violence toward one another. Though the entrance of sin thwarts that plan, the gospel of Christ can transform each person into a new creation in Christ Jesus (2 Corinthians 5:17). This creates a new community in which domestic violence should not exist.

A Biblical Perspective on Violence

The first act of violence recorded in the Bible was one of domestic violence. Cain killed his brother, Abel, resulting in his removal from the presence of God and his turning into a restless wanderer (Genesis 4:1–16). Cain's expression of unrestrained anger and his failure to accept responsibility for the welfare of another human earned both a strong rebuke and punishment from God.

The one who initiates domestic violence participates in violent acts against another. Such violence does not please God. The psalmist reveals God's attitude toward violence: "The Lord examines the righteous, but the wicked, those who love violence, he hates with a passion" (Psalm 11:5).

Before listing the fruit of the Spirit, Paul identifies multiple human excesses which he called "acts of the flesh." Among those actions that he notes hinder one's inheriting the kingdom of God include "fits of rage" (Galatians 5:19–21). These negative emotional outbursts, which often initiate domestic violence, prove antithetical to the working of the Holy Spirit (See *also* Ephesians 4:26 and Colossians 3:8).

An abuser may verbally intimidate or belittle the object of his or her anger. Such abuse, though more covert, is also evil and intolerable. Jesus Christ, in His "Sermon on the Mount" (Matthew 5–7), challenges Kingdom people to a higher standard of living. For example, when He decries the extreme of murder, He also notes that unrestrained

anger and negative verbal expressions make one “subject to judgment” and “in danger of the fire of hell” (Matthew 5:21–22).

Tragically, abusers often direct their domestic violence toward children. Jesus teaches that His followers must “become like little children” in order to see the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 18:1–6; see also Mark 9:33–37 and Luke 9:46–48). He also says in Matthew 18:6, “if anyone causes one of these little ones—those who believe in me—to stumble, it would be better for them to have a large millstone hung around their neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea.”

For believers to close their eyes and minds to the prevalence and damage of domestic violence is unacceptable. As Proverbs 24:11–12 states, “Rescue those being led away to death; hold back those staggering toward slaughter. If you say, ‘But we know nothing about this,’ does not he who weighs the heart perceive it? Does not he who guards your life know it? Will he not repay everyone according to what they have done?” This solemn reminder that God sees and knows about the situation must serve as a warning that the Church must engage in identifying and reaching out with healing to those abused through domestic violence.

Ministry in the Crisis of Domestic Violence

Numerous avenues exist for the Church to increase its awareness of—and remain involved in ministering to—victims of domestic violence. More people feel the negative impact of domestic violence than the abuser and abused. Children, the extended family, friends, and even society itself stand within the circle of those victimized.

The Church must not see itself as immune to domestic violence but must remain especially diligent in addressing any domestic violence perpetrated by its leaders. Paul warns about this in his letter to Titus, declaring that the overseer “must be blameless—not overbearing, nor quick-tempered, not given to drunkenness, not violent, not pursuing dishonest gain” (Titus 1:7).

The Church's teaching and preaching ministry can serve as a preemptive way to address the issue of domestic violence. The Bible's powerful and living message, declared clearly and lovingly, can effect change in the hearts and lives of hearers. The same Spirit who inspired the writing of Scripture anoints its proclamation to bring judgment, repentance, and restoration.

Expression of God's love through other believers remains a source of strength, and healing, and a demonstration of His grace. This grace assures any abused person of God's concern for them and His power to restore and heal their injuries. His grace helps abused persons not to blame themselves for what they have suffered; through His grace they also can see themselves as not beyond His help.

God does not will that people remain in abusive situations. The actions of abusers have lasting and tragic consequences, yet His grace provides a path to repentance for even the worst of sinners.

Conclusion

The Church must increase its awareness of domestic violence; keep its voice clear about this evil; and function as a source of protection, healing, and restoration for any victims of domestic violence. In Luke 4, as Jesus introduces His mission using the words of Isaiah the prophet, He declares, "the Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" (vv. 18,19). This mission of Christ must also remain the mission of the Church.

1 *Assemblies of God Statement of Fundamental Truths, Number 4*, "The Fall of Man."

2 National Coalition against Domestic Violence, "Statistics," www.ncadv.org, accessed February 7, 2022.

POSITION PAPER ON THE FINAL JUDGMENT

(Adopted by the General Presbytery in session August 5-7, 2024)

Summary

Fundamental Truth 15 of the Assemblies of God Statement of Fundamental Truths, “The Final Judgment,” makes four claims regarding God’s final decision on evil. First, there will be a final judgment of God. Second, the dead will be resurrected and judged according to their works and whether their name is in the Book of Life. Third, the guilty will share in the punishment of the devil and his angels, the Beast, and the False Prophet. Finally, this punishment will be everlasting. This paper will offer guidance on dealing with some of the more difficult questions regarding the doctrine of hell and clarify why the Assemblies of God does not affirm universalism/ultimate reconciliation or annihilationism/conditionalism. This document contains guidelines for ministers on how to teach about God’s judgment.

Preliminary Concerns

The Problem of Hell

Some have called the doctrine of hell the most disturbing doctrine in Christian theology. The traditional interpretation of hell emphasizes God’s final judgment as an eternal punishment imposed by God (Matthew 25:41; Mark 9:46–48; 2 Thessalonians 1:6–9; Jude 7; Revelation 14:11; 20:10–15). Since much of the imagery surrounding this punishment involves fire, a debate among traditionalists has been whether to interpret the fire as symbolic or literal. Scholars sometimes call this traditional view of hell “Eternal Conscious Torment” or ECT.

For much of church history, both the traditional understanding of hell as a place of eternal torment imposed by God and the biblical character of God have been in tension. Old Testament writers described God throughout the Old Testament as a “compassionate and gracious God,

slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness”¹ (Exodus 34:6; see also Nehemiah 9:17; Psalms 86:15; 103:8; 145:8; Joel 2:13; Jonah 4:2). The New Testament states that “God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son” (John 3:16) because God “does not want anyone to be destroyed”² (2 Peter 3:9, NLT). Finally, “God is love” (1 John 4:8). How do we reconcile eternal torment coming from an eternally loving God? If it is hard to reconcile the existence of suffering with the character of God, how much more of a challenge is the existence of hell?

At the same time, the Old Testament writers record God’s commitment to justice. “All his acts are just and true” (Daniel 4:37, NLT). The Psalms and the Prophets repeatedly affirm that God is just (Psalms 11:7; 33:5; 50:6; 89:14; 101:1; 140:12; Isaiah 5:16; 30:18; Jeremiah 9:24; Ezekiel 34:16; Amos 5:24; Malachi 2:17). The Bible promises that Jesus will judge the world with justice (Acts 17:31; Hebrews 1:8; Revelation 19:11). How do we reconcile eternal punishment as a just punishment for sin, no matter how severe, when all sin is temporal? Where is justice in a punishment that is only punitive and not redemptive? How can an eternal place of torment be the decision of a just God?

Accepting the idea that the punishment of God is everlasting leads to other questions, including the fate of the unevangelized. Can people receive the salvation offered in Christ apart from hearing the message of the gospel? If not, should they be judged as if they had rejected the message they did not receive? Again, does this fit with the character of a just and loving God?

Alternative Views to Eternal Punishment

Considering this tension between the nature of hell and the character of a loving and just God, other options are possible in place of the traditional or ECT view. One of the best-known alternative views is the belief that eventually everyone will be saved. This view has been ascribed to the early Christian teacher Origen and is also associated with the Early Church bishop Gregory of Nyssa.

The early universalist argument was not that the wicked would be saved immediately after death or that the wicked could be saved apart from Christ. No one argued for the “all roads lead to heaven” approach of modern-day pluralism. Rather, they believed in the existence of hell as a

place of temporary punishment. Here, the wicked could be purified and eventually repent of their sins and be reconciled to God. In this view, sometimes referred to as universal or ultimate restoration/reconciliation, hell functions as a place of redemption.

Christian defenders of universalism or universal reconciliation support their views with biblical passages describing the character of God or the scope of salvation rather than passages on the judgment of the wicked. From those passages, proponents reason their way to universalism by arguing that a loving and just God could never punish eternally. Verses that say otherwise are reinterpreted so that “eternal” means “of a coming age” rather than “everlasting.” Other passages offered in support of universal reconciliation describe the scope of God’s work in Jesus as reconciler or Lord to include “all” people or things, or “every” knee and tongue (Romans 5:18; 1 Corinthians 15:22; Philippians 2:11; Colossians 1:20; 1 Timothy 4:10). These passages are interpreted to mean a universal reconciliation with God for all of creation, in the end.

Another alternative view to ECT, also tracing back to the Early Church, is annihilationism (aka conditional immortality or conditionalism). This view teaches that temporal punishment of the wicked will result in their utter destruction: they cease to exist. Some argue that the nonexistence of the wicked is the extent of their punishment.

Many are attracted to annihilationism because they find it easier to reconcile an eternally loving God with hell if the torment for temporal sins is timed so that only nonexistence is eternal. Nonexistence could also be understood as the preference of the wicked who refuse to recognize God as God. If there can be no eternity outside an eternal God, then rejecting God is rejecting eternity. Therefore, annihilation would be the natural outcome of what the wicked desire.

Among evangelicals, annihilationism earns more support than universalism. Proponents emphasize passages that describe God’s judgment in terms of destruction rather than eternity (e.g., Matthew 7:13; 10:28; Romans 6:23; 2 Thessalonians 1:9; Hebrews 10:39; 2 Peter 3:7). Imagery that speaks to torment, including fire, can also refer to destruction. The fire rages. The fire burns and utterly destroys.

The Assemblies of God holds to a traditional view of hell as eternal torment, though it does not require a particular belief on the nature of that torment. In light of Fundamental Truth 15, the Assemblies of God rejects both universalism and annihilationism. This article will explain this rejection and offer ways to answer some difficult questions concerning the doctrine of hell.

Unpacking Fundamental Truth 15

In Fundamental Truth 15, four claims are made regarding the final judgment:

1. God’s judgment of the guilty is final.

The final judgment of God represents the finality of God’s judgment. There is no hope offered for the future salvation of those cast into the lake of fire in Matthew 25:46; Mark 9:43–48; Jude 7; Revelation 19:20; 20:10–15; 21:8. Hebrews 9:27 says that “people are destined to die once, and after that to face judgment” without any hint of another chance. Those hearing the message about Christ in their lifetime do not have to go to hell. Now is the day of salvation (2 Corinthians 6:2)!

One concern regarding the Christian doctrine of hell is that God seems vindictive. The overarching view of the doctrine of hell should be in terms of justice and salvation rather than retribution and punishment. For God to restore creation to its intended good state requires the removal of evil. If God does not permanently separate the wicked from His good creation, then God would be condemning creation to an ongoing threat from evil. God’s permanent final judgment of evil is part of His salvation of creation. Rather than hell being punitive, God’s judgment of the wicked allows for the complete restoration of creation as a realm without sin or death.

God created humanity with free will. The first humans chose to reject God’s good plan. They hid from God and chose His “absence” (not that anyone can escape God! Psalm 139:8). Hell is the completion of that absence. Revelation 21 and 22 add nuance to the fate of those who have rejected God. Revelation 21:8 affirms the fiery lake/second death of Revelation 20:10–15. Revelation 21:27 says, “Nothing evil will be allowed to enter [the city], nor anyone who

practices shameful idolatry and dishonesty—but only those whose names are written in the Lamb’s Book of Life.” Those who are purified and whose name is written in the Lamb’s Book of Life may enter the city freely (Revelation 21:27; 22:14). The impure (also listed in Revelation 21:8) are outside the city and cannot enter (Revelation 22:15). C. S. Lewis suggested that “the doors of hell are locked on the inside.... They enjoy forever the horrible freedom they have demanded, and are therefore self-enslaved.”³

Yes, hell is a place of torment whose inhabitants experience the absence of good. But good is not absent because God does not love everyone. Good is absent because those inhabitants have rejected God and have willingly chosen His absence. They prefer the presence of evil over the presence of good. That choice now becomes final and eternal. This segregation enables salvation to be complete. A restored earth where God himself dwells with humanity is the eternal reality of those who have not rejected God (Revelation 21:3).

2. The guilty are judged by their works in the absence of redemption.

A major concern in the Christian doctrine of hell is the fate of the unreached. If someone can only be saved by the work of Jesus, and they can only respond to Jesus by hearing the gospel (Romans 10:14), that does not mean those who have never heard the gospel are damned through no fault of their own. The Assemblies of God does not believe that someone will go to hell because they were born in the wrong country or the wrong century.

According to Revelation 20:12–15, the dead are judged not only by the absence of their names in the “Book of Life” (representing their “roster” among the redeemed) but by the works they have done. Those acts define the wicked who have no place in God’s new creation, including the cowardly, the unbelieving, the vile, murderers, sexually immoral, those who practice magic arts, idolaters, and all liars (Revelation 21:8). (See also Matthew 8:12; 13:41–42; 22:13; 23:15; 25:30, 33; Luke 13:27; Galatians 5:19–21; Revelation 21:27; 22:15.)

The essence of sin is the rejection of God, His goodness, and His truth (Romans 1:25; cf. 1:18–23). The rejection of God and the resulting actions, not only failure to have heard the gospel, bring judgment. God has revealed His goodness by His works (Romans 1:18–23, 25) so that all

may acknowledge Him as Creator (Acts 14:15–17). God saves all who repent of their sins and trust in Jesus.

Jesus has called the Church to make disciples of all nations (Matthew 28:19) and to be His witnesses to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8). “There is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12). God does not unfairly condemn the unevangelized because they have not heard the gospel. Rather, they are judged by their works against the light they have had available to them (Romans 2:11–16), with the result that “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23). Now that Christ has been made known, our responsibility is to share the good news so that all can freely choose to receive the indwelling Holy Spirit and live in a right relationship with their Creator (Romans 10:14–15; 8:1–11).

3. The guilty share in the punishment of God’s enemies.

The Bible makes it clear that the lake of fire was not created for people but for the devil and his angels (Matthew 25:41). God’s purpose and desire for humanity has always been good. God does not want “anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance” (2 Peter 3:9). Nevertheless, God will not allow Satan to spoil the new heavens and new earth that are to come. God will cast him in the lake of fire. Those who follow Satan against God will share in that judgment (John 16:8, 11) because evil’s removal is necessary from God’s new creation for God’s new creation to be wholly good.

The nature of our sin against God is like the nature of Satan’s rebellion. Both are a rejection of God and His good plan. God provided a way for humanity’s reconciliation. The price of that costly way was the death of the Son of God. Many have chosen to accept God’s great gift and are no longer a part of that realm of evil. By contrast, there is no hint in Scripture that Satan desires reconciliation with God. His fate of eternal separation is just. Those who go into eternity still rejecting God rightly share that eternal separation (Hebrews 10:26–31).

Annihilationism insists that the eternal punishment of the damned will be nonexistence. Those found in Christ will live in God's eternity, while those who reject God's omission or commission will simply remain dead (or else be resurrected to face judgment, then face nonexistence).

The argument that the wicked share the same judgment as death and the grave or Hades (Revelation 20:14–15) and are therefore destroyed misses the point. Death and Hades are not beings or persons. They are temporary states of existence and someday eliminated when all their residents are gone (1 Corinthians 15:53–56; Revelation 21:4). Annihilationism errs in that it does not eliminate death but rather elevates it to a permanent state.

If Satan is to be tormented “day and night for ever and ever” (Revelation 20:10), that also defines the punishment of those who choose to follow Satan's example instead of receiving the grace of God. The nature of Sin (with a capital S) is such that it entails the rejection of God, leading to actions known as sins (lowercase s). Paul makes this distinction in Romans 6, where he wrote about dying to Sin (Romans 6:1–14) with the result of no longer needing to commit acts of sin (Romans 6:15–23).

4. The punishment of the guilty will be everlasting.

One of the key questions regarding interpreting these Scriptures is the nature of eternity. The Bible applies terminology for eternity to both salvation and judgment (Daniel 12:2; Matthew 18:8; 25:41, 46; Hebrews 6:2; Jude 7). What does eternity mean in these contexts?

One way of interpreting eternity is that it means “everlasting” or “unending.” Another way some interpret eternal is “the age to come” (in contrast to this age, which will go away). For example, Matthew 25:46 uses the phrase “eternal [aionion] punishment.” Some deny that this means eternal in the sense of absolutely unending. In the same verse, however, Jesus uses the same word of “eternal life” (aionion) in a manner that is directly and exactly parallel. In other words, eternal punishment will be as everlasting as eternal life. This leaves no room for later restoration of the wicked.

Another New Testament passage refers to eternal punishment as “eternal judgment,” a judgment that is valid eternally (Hebrews 6:2). This “everlasting destruction” (or separation) is “from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might” (2 Thessalonians 1:9). In these passages the word death speaks of spiritual death or separation from God. Therefore, eternal judgment brings a final and eternal separation from God.

Because the salvation of creation depends on God’s judgment of evil and the testimony of Scripture speaks to the finality of God’s judgment, the Assemblies of God considers any form of universalism to be an error.⁴ The rich man of Luke 16:19–31, already in torment, seeks easing of his pain and asks that a warning go to his brothers. He never asks for reconciliation with God. His rejection is ongoing. Near the end of John’s vision, the angel says, “Let the one who does wrong continue to do wrong; let the vile person continue to be vile; let the one who does right continue to do right; and let the holy person continue to be holy.” (Revelation 22:11).

The Bible offers no possibility of repentance after death nor a lessening of the torment of separation from God (Luke 16:23–26). Some call universalism “God’s favorite heresy” for its picture of none perishing. We understand God to be at work saving all who will be saved according to their will. The Assemblies of God teaches that humans retain the power to resist God’s grace regardless of His will.⁵ That “none perish” reflects the will of God, yet that does not translate into universal salvation because of human freedom. Universalism lacks scriptural support. This is why those who say all are saved according to God’s will alone must also argue that God chooses some for damnation because Scripture does not teach universal salvation.

Conclusion

The Assemblies of God rejects both the doctrines of ultimate reconciliation and annihilationism based on its understanding of Scripture, rooted in Revelation 20:10–15 but including other texts which describe the final judgment of God (Matthew 18:6–9; 25:31–46; Mark 9:42–48; 2 Thessalonians 1:8–9; Jude 7; Revelation 14:9–11; 21:8, 27; 22:11, 15). A doctrine of universalism harms both soteriology and eschatology, and thus causes more damage than a doctrine of annihilationism.

The Assemblies of God rejects both positions and holds that the best interpretation of Scripture is that hell is eternal separation from God and His goodness and is, therefore, an eternal punishment. The Bible's teaching about this final judgment has a redemptive purpose and intends to draw people to salvation. The warnings are there so that none should perish and be condemned (John 3:16).

Guidelines for Teaching on God's Final Judgment

Ministers must take seriously the many biblical warnings about the coming judgment of God (Matthew 3:7; Luke 11:32; John 3:36; Acts 24:25; Romans 1:18; 2 Corinthians 5:10; Colossians 3:6; 1 Thessalonians 2:16; 1 Timothy 3:6; Hebrews 10:27; 2 Peter 3:7; Jude 6). We offer these few guidelines on how to teach about the judgment of God as ministers of the gospel:

1. We understand that the warning of God's judgment is a good thing. It tells us that God is faithful in judging evil and restoring good. God's judgment brings about justice and life for creation. In a world that cries for justice, God's nature guarantees that it will come. Teach people that God's judgment is a message of hope.
2. We see that we are all in danger before God's final judgment, apart from the message of the gospel. Allow the doctrine of judgment to fill us with gratitude as those who have been saved, with humility as those who needed to be saved, and with love for others who also need to hear the message of the gospel as we did.
3. We recognize that biblical warnings regarding judgment are given so that people might be spared God's judgment. Understanding that sinners will be judged is an opportunity to hear that we can be saved. Use the message of judgment to proclaim the gospel.
4. We must never teach the doctrine of hell with glee, as if we cannot wait for people to burn. At the same time, we cannot declare with certainty who will be in hell when we cannot judge the way God does. Rather, we should teach about hell with reverence and with grief. God is actively fighting to keep people from going to hell. In the same way, by our love, our prayers, and our witness, we strive to see people rescued from hell and eternal separation from God. Charles Spurgeon declared, "If sinners be damned, at least let them leap to hell over our dead bodies. And if they perish, let them perish with our arms wrapped about their knees, imploring them to stay... let not one go unwarned and unprayed for."⁶
5. We must remember that God's ways are not our ways. It is appropriate for people to ask questions because it is difficult to embrace a faith that they cannot question. At the same time, we must remember that we do not have God's insight to judge as perfectly as God. While God holds to justice (Genesis 18:25), He is not on the same level as creation. In Romans 11:33–34, Paul wrote, "Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out! 'Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor?' " We can only know what

God has revealed. We must remain faithful to what God has revealed, including the revelation of God's judgment.

Notes

1. Scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV®. Copyright ©1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.® Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. zondervan.com. The "NIV" and "New International Version" are trademarks registered in the United States Patent and Trademark Office by Biblica, Inc.®
2. Scripture quotations marked (NLT) are taken from the Holy Bible, New Living Translation, copyright ©1996, 2004, 2015 by Tyndale House Foundation. Used by permission of Tyndale House Publishers, Carol Stream, Illinois 60188. All rights reserved.
3. C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (London/New York: Harper-Collins, 1996), 130.
4. Universalism belongs to the category of "eschatological errors" the promotion of which can be a cause for ministerial discipline as stated in the Bylaws of the General Council of the Assemblies of God, Article IX. B, Section 3.
5. See the position papers on "Assurance of Salvation" and "A Response to Reformed Theology" at ag.org.
6. Charles Haddon Spurgeon, "The Wailing of Risca," *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, vol. 7 (London: Passmore and Alabaster), 11.

A BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE ON GAMBLING

(Adopted by the General Presbytery in session August 1-3, 2015)

The unprecedented pervasiveness of gambling in American culture and its consequences demand a critique from a Christian perspective. To determine whether participation in gambling is appropriate, Spirit-filled followers of Jesus must recognize the problematic nature of gambling, understand relevant principles derived from Holy Scripture, and apply those principles prayerfully and with sensitivity to the potential impact that gambling has on the individual and others in the individual's circle of influence.

The Nature of Gambling

The basic dictionary definition of gambling is “to play a game for money or property; to bet on an uncertain outcome.”¹ A more precise, legal description may help Christians understand gambling and differentiate it from legitimate transactions in which creative efforts, useful skills, and responsible investment (positive expected returns, at least in the long term, as well as inherent value independent of the marginal risk being taken) are integral factors:

A person engages in gambling if he stakes or risks something of value upon the outcome of a contest of chance or a future contingent event not under his control or influence.... Gambling does not include bona fide business transactions valid under the law of contracts, such as the purchase or sale at a future date of securities or commodities, contracts of indemnity or guaranty and life, health or accident insurance.²

Gambling, then, is recognized as any activity in which wealth changes hands, mainly on the basis of chance and with risk to the gambler.

Gambling involves a wide variety of activities, both illegal (and thus prohibited by state and/or federal law) and legal (and thus usually highly regulated by state and/or federal law). Legalized gambling is often euphemistically referred to as “gaming” in the United States, and includes many types of games in which even some Christians may sometimes find themselves participating recreationally. These include, generally, three categories: fixed-odds (or “pari-mutuel”) betting, including horse and greyhound racing and other sporting events; casino gaming, both table and electronic (e.g., slot machines, video poker); and noncasino gaming, such as bingo, dead pools, lotteries, scratch cards, carnival games, card games, confidence games (e.g., the shell game) and dice-based games. Activities (such as raffles and sometimes, bingo) that are designed primarily to support a charitable cause, and only secondarily to generate a possible return on a purchase, are not usually considered to be “gambling,” though certain of these may be a matter of personal conscience.

The Problem of Gambling

The prevalence of gambling has increased as a result of its accelerated legalization³, enhanced media exposure through mega-lotteries, expanded accessibility through online gaming and state-sanctioned lotteries, perceived acceptability of “gaming” as healthy social activity and recreational entertainment, and professed claims of economic benefit through job creation. Nonetheless, gambling’s troublesome consequences, both individual and societal, remain.

For many persons gambling results in psychological addiction⁴ that mirrors other forms of addiction, such as alcohol and drug dependence, in terms of symptoms⁵ and variation in brain chemistry.⁶ Gambling’s threat to public health is understood in terms of its susceptibility to organized criminal influence and control, as well as its detrimental impact on society in terms of marital dissolutions⁷, impoverished families, bankruptcies, suicides⁸ and costs of associated social services, such as treating addictions and responding to increased crime.

In the social sciences, the term “gambling disorders” incorporates both “problem gambling” and “pathological gambling,”⁹ the latter being the more severe and subject to clinical diagnosis. Researchers spanning three decades estimate that from slightly less than 1 percent up to 1.9 percent of the U. S. general population suffers from pathological gambling.¹⁰ In a meta-analysis of 120 previous studies, researchers at the Center for Addictions at Harvard Medical School found that approximately 1.1 percent of the adult general population were past-year level three [pathological] gamblers and an additional 2.8 percent were classified as level 2 [problematic] gamblers who were having some problems as a result of their gambling but did not meet diagnostic criteria as pathological.¹¹ This research suggests that almost 4 percent of the adult population in the United States suffers from some form of gambling disorder. Of the pathological gamblers, approximately 75 percent have an alcohol use disorder and 38 percent also have a drug use disorder.¹² Sadly, more recent research conducted by the Research Institute on Addictions at the University of Buffalo indicates that 6.5 percent of young people (ages 14–21) are at-risk and problem gamblers (mostly male), a rate much higher than the general adult population.¹³

Those who think they may escape the problems by avoiding some types of gambling while participating in seemingly more innocuous forms should consider the conclusion of university researchers funded by the gambling industry itself: “Research does not substantiate the belief that some games—such as online poker or slot machines—are riskier than others. People can get into trouble with all types of gambling, from sports betting to the lottery, from bingo to casino games.”¹⁴ This should serve as a warning even to many good and relatively psychologically healthy people, including Christians, who “have been ‘softened’ toward frequent gambling by the permissive attitudes of family or friends, and by favorable portrayals of betting in popular culture. They start gambling for entertainment, or to be sociable.... From that point, the conditioning process takes over, forging a connection in the brain between winning and feeling good.”¹⁵

While all levels of society may be adversely affected by gambling, repeated studies have shown that the poor are particularly susceptible to the inducements of the industry, and are deliberately targeted.¹⁶ State-sponsored lotteries likewise generate much of their revenue from the less affluent who are often desperate for a solution to their financial ills and more easily drawn in by lottery advertising.¹⁷ That those at or near the poverty level spend a greater percentage of their income on various gambling venues is well documented. One recent study by a major university institute found that problem gambling was twice as common in “disadvantaged” neighborhoods as the more affluent. Moreover, the poorest in these disadvantaged neighborhoods were the ones at greatest risk for gambling problems.¹⁸

Given these problematic effects of gambling upon individuals, governmental reliance upon state-sanctioned gambling to fund its legitimate activities such as education is deplorable. Furthermore, marketing and promotion of state-sanctioned gambling—which amounts to a tax (though voluntary) upon those in society who can least afford to pay the monetary and social penalties accompanying such gambling—is especially egregious.

The Bible and Gambling

Most religious authorities generally have disapproved of gambling because of the widely recognized social consequences associated with it. However, since the Bible contains no explicit statements condemning gambling¹⁹, it is often categorized among the adiaphora, “matters of indifference” in religion since they are not expressly forbidden by the Scriptures. However, the Bible certainly provides principles that should govern the Christian’s thinking about gambling.

1. Gambling is inadvisable because it disregards responsible stewardship.

The Bible clearly teaches that all things belong to God. “The earth is the LORD’s, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it” (Psalm 24:1). Since all things belong to

God, people are placed in the position of stewards who must give a proper accounting for everything given to them in trust.

The first step in a faithful administration of this stewardship is the giving of self to God. Believers must recognize they are not their own (1 Corinthians 6:19). They have been redeemed with a price, not of silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Jesus (1 Peter 1:18–19). The churches of Macedonia set a worthy example of personal dedication when “they gave themselves first of all to the Lord” (2 Corinthians 8:5). Life, with all it involves, is a stewardship to be administered for the glory of God.

People who honestly dedicate themselves to God will also recognize that all they possess must be handled as a stewardship. The Parable of the Bags of Gold [Talents] (Matthew 25:14–30) indicates that the good and faithful servants administered the talents entrusted to them in such a way that the master was pleased. The wicked and lazy servant failed in his stewardship responsibility and suffered the appropriate consequences.

When people recognize their stewardship responsibilities, they will not consider gambling in any form to be proper management of divinely bestowed resources, time, and ability. Even secular business ethics will not tolerate those who gamble with resources put in their trust. Christian responsibility transcends all other responsibility and, for the Christian, gambling is a total disregard of the principle of stewardship. It is a prostitution of God-given assets which should be used to glorify God by providing for family needs and advancing His kingdom.

2. Gambling is imprudent because it involves a chance of gain only at the expense and suffering of others, often the poor.

The nature of gambling is such that a person has a chance of gain only because others have suffered loss. The economic benefits come only to a very few. The financial loss is borne by many who usually least can afford it. Whether or not the financial loss is

excessive, gamblers are basically the losers while the operators of gambling establishments are the winners.

19 In the Old Testament era casting lots was used to determine God's will in some cases (Ex. 28:30; Josh. 18:6–10; 1 Sam. 14:41–42; Jonah 1:7). One New Testament occurrence is found in Acts 1:26. But these biblical practices in no way meet the definition of gambling.

The suffering caused by gambling is totally inconsistent with the teaching of Scripture concerning love. Not only is the Christian to love those who are lovable, but even enemies (Matthew 5:44). God's people are to love their neighbors as themselves (Matthew 22:39; cf. Leviticus 19:18). Love places limits on the Christian's choices: "No one should seek their own good, but the good of others" (1 Corinthians 10:24). Christians are under a love-obligation to choose not to engage in behaviors that they know could cause harm to others or cause other Christians to emulate their risky behavior and thus stumble and fall (Romans 14:13–15, 19–21; 1 Corinthians 8:9–13; 10:32).

The principle of love will prevent Christians from gambling because of the damage it does to others. The principle of love will cause Christians to oppose any effort by the state or any other organization to legalize any activity based on a weakness of people that degrades society. William Temple, late Archbishop of Canterbury, stated the Christian position well when he wrote:

Gambling challenges that view of life which the Christian church exists to uphold and extend. Its glorification of mere chance is a denial of the divine order of nature. To risk money haphazardly is to disregard the insistence of the Church in every age of living faith that possessions are a trust, and that men must account to God for their use. The persistent appeal to covetousness is fundamentally opposed to the unselfishness which was taught by Jesus Christ and by the New Testament as a whole. The attempt (inseparable from gambling) to make profit out of the inevitable loss and possible

suffering of others is the antithesis of that love of one's neighbor on which our Lord insisted.²⁰

3. Gambling is inconsistent with the work ethic of Scripture.

Throughout Scripture the importance of work is emphasized. In several places, the correlation between working and eating is stated. The Old Testament reminds us that generally, "Those who work their land will have abundant food" (Proverbs 12:11). In the New Testament, the same principle is stated with great forcefulness. To the Thessalonians Paul wrote: "When we were with you, we gave you this rule: 'The one who is unwilling to work shall not eat'" (2 Thessalonians 3:10).

In the wisdom of God work was assigned in the Garden of Eden even before the Fall (Genesis 2:15ff; cf. 1:28). Though sin resulted in a change of the nature of work (Genesis 3:17, 19), the responsibility of working was never rescinded. Any effort to circumvent the work ethic of Scripture can result only in failure rather than flourishing.²¹ Gambling, whether to secure wealth in a hurry or to place bread on the table, is inconsistent with what the Bible teaches about work.

4. Gambling is contrary to biblical warnings against greed or avarice.

Not only does the Bible require that one should work for the necessities of life, but much biblical wisdom also warns against the "something for nothing" or "get rich quick" approach that is fueled by greed: "One eager to get rich will not go unpunished" (Proverbs 28:20). On the other hand, Proverbs 13:11 encourages patient work and steady investment: "Dishonest money dwindles away, but whoever gathers money little by little makes it grow."

Jesus warned against the seducing evil of greed: "Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; life does not consist in an abundance of possessions" (Luke 12:15). Likewise, Paul admonished Christians to avoid avarice. "But among you there must not be even a hint... of greed, because [this is] improper for God's holy people" (Ephesians 5:3; cf. Romans 1:29). In fact, Paul repeatedly associated greed with idolatry (1

Corinthians 6:10; Ephesians 5:5; Colossians 3:5) that disqualifies one from participation in the kingdom of Christ. Inasmuch as greed motivates gambling, it certainly is a seductive evil that must be avoided by followers of Jesus.

5. Gambling is inconsistent with a healthy recognition of God's providence.

Proverbs 16:33 clearly affirms the sovereignty of God over what people suppose are chance events. God's people are not to covet riches or worry about material needs but are to trust in God's sovereignty—not luck or chance. The Sovereign LORD rebuked and promised retribution on those disobedient ones among the Covenant People who forsook the LORD by committing virtual idolatry with “Fortune” and “Destiny” (Isaiah 65:11–15), the pagan gods of good fortune and fate in the ancient Babylonian world comparable to “Lady Luck” in the contemporary world.

Jesus' warning against greed (Luke 12:15) is placed in the immediate context of His teaching on trusting in God the Father's faithfulness and providential provision (12:22–34). Jesus admonished His disciples to neither worry nor set their hearts on their life's sustenance, food, or clothing, “For the pagan world runs after all such things, and your Father knows that you need them. But seek his kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well.... For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (12:30–31, 34).

Because gambling reflects people's faith in Chance rather than Providence, and trust in Luck rather than the Lord, it ought to be avoided by those who are seeking the Father's kingdom.

6. Gambling is unwise because it tends to be enslaving.

Gambling, like other evils, has a tendency to become an addiction, which is a condition that is contrary to the teaching of Scripture. The Word of God points out that a Christian will refuse to be enslaved to (or mastered by) even lawful, permissible activities (1 Corinthians 6:12). The person indwelt by the Holy Spirit will be characterized by self-control (Galatians 5:23).

It is obvious that habitual gamblers are under the control of the compulsion to gamble. Rather than being servants of God, they are servants of a desire they cannot handle. Paul described the condition clearly when he wrote, “Don’t you know that when you offer yourselves to someone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one you obey?” (Romans 6:16).

7. Gambling is a compromise of Christian ethics and witness.

A great deal of gambling, particularly casino gambling, takes place in lavish facilities offered relatively inexpensively to attract maximum participation, and featuring entertainment that is often tempting in its sensuality and indulgence. Attendance and participation in such an environment poses serious challenges for Christian witness and conduct.

The Christian and Gambling

As Jesus’ followers consider the appropriateness of their involvement in various gambling activities, the following questions may help to focus many of the current issues and biblical principles set forth in this paper.

1. Is this good stewardship of the resources that God has entrusted to me?
2. Does it hurt anyone by taking money from others; by taking advantage of others’ weaknesses; by causing others, following my example, to stumble; or by contributing to an immoral system?
3. Am I doing honest work regularly to meet my needs?
4. Am I motivated by greed and covetousness, which is idolatry?
5. Do I trust in God as my source, or do I trust Lady Luck?
6. Is this something that could become an addiction? Does it occupy my thoughts? Is it becoming a compulsion?
7. How does it impact my spiritual walk with the Lord?

With appropriate humility and holiness before the Sovereign LORD, sincere Christians acknowledge that other like-minded believers may feel greater freedom in regard to so-called adiaphora (debatable matters), especially when exercising self-control in occasional, budgeted entertainment. Nevertheless, Christians are called upon to recognize the weightiness of decision-making in regards to participation in gambling

activities. There may be lurking danger in one's unforeseen predisposition to addiction. There may be an unintended example that leads others within one's sphere of influence into risky behavior. On the one hand, one's witness to the world may fall short with respect to avoiding avarice. On the other hand, one's example may also fail to inspire a responsible work ethic and conscientious biblical stewardship.

Notes

1. <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/gamble>, accessed March 9, 2013.
2. <http://definitions.uslegal.com/g/gambling/>, accessed March 9, 2013.
3. Especially since passage of the federal Indian Gaming Regulatory Act of 1988.
4. This is illustrated classically in Fyodor Dostoevsky's *The Gambler*, 1867. Originally published in Russian, it is available in many English translations and in online free editions. See also Howard J. Shaffer, "Understanding the Means and Objects of Addiction: Technology, the Internet, and Gambling." *Journal of Gambling Studies* 12:4 (1996): 461–469.
5. This includes increasing tolerance (e.g., needs to gamble more money to achieve the desired excitement); symptoms of withdrawal if gambling is stopped or reduced; and an inability to stop or reduce gambling.
6. John Mangels, "Gambling Addicts Arise from Mix of Flawed Thinking, Brain Chemistry and Habitual Behavior," *The Plain Dealer*, May 15, 2011. http://blog.cleveland.com/metro/2011/05/gambling_addicts_arise_from_mi.html accessed March 12, 2013.
7. "It is estimated that one problem gambler affects at least seven other people—spouses, children, extended family members, and friends. Problem gambling can hurt not only one's finances, but one's physical and mental health, as well as relationships." AAMFT Therapy Topics, American Association for Marital and Family Therapy. http://www.aamft.org/imis15/Content/Consumer_Updates/Problem_Gambling.aspx accessed March 12, 2013.
8. Alex Blaszczyński and E. Farrell, "A Case Series of 44 Completed Gambling Related Suicides." *Journal of Gambling Studies*, 14 (1998): 93–110.
9. The diagnosis of "pathological gambling" was added to the American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders in 1980.
10. Christine Reilly, "The Prevalence of Gambling Disorders in the United States: Three Decades of Evidence" in *Increasing the Odds*, Vol. 3, Gambling and the Public Health, Part 1, 2009. http://www.ncrg.org/sites/default/files/uploads/docs/monographs/ncrg_monograph_vol3.pdf accessed March 9, 2013.
11. Ibid., 4. Reilly cites a 1997 study by Shaffer, Hall & Vander Bilt. Research supported by a grant from the National Center for Responsible Gaming.

12. Ibid., 5. Reilly cites a 2005 study by Petry, Stinson & Grant, University of Connecticut Health Center and National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, 2005.
13. John W. Welte, Grace M. Barnes, Marie-Cecile O. Tidwell & Joseph H. Hoffman, "The Prevalence of Problem Gambling Among U.S. Adolescents and Young Adults: Results from a National Survey." *Journal of Gambling Studies* 24:2 (2008): 119-133.
14. National Center for Responsible Gaming, Fact Sheet on Gambling Disorders, <http://www.collegegambling.org/just-facts/gambling-disorders> accessed March 9, 2013.
15. John Mangels, "Gambling Addicts Arise from Mix of Flawed Thinking, Brain Chemistry and Habitual Behavior," *The Plain Dealer*, May 15, 2011. http://blog.cleveland.com/metro/2011/05/gambling_addicts_arise_from_mi.html accessed March 12, 2013.
16. <https://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/06/21/gaming-the-poor> accessed November 25, 2014.
17. <https://www.npr.org/2014/07/16/332015825/lotteries-take-in-billions-often-attract-the-poor>, accessed November 26, 2014.
18. <https://www.buffalo.edu/news/releases/2014/01/001.html>, accessed November 25, 2014.
19. In Old Testament times, lots were cast to determine in some cases the will of God (Exodus 28:30; Joshua 18: 6–10; 1 Samuel 14: 41–42; Jonah 1: 7). There is a case in the New Testament in Acts 1:26. But these biblical practices in no way fit the definition of gambling.
20. William Temple, *Gambling and Ethics*. London: The Churches' Committee on Gambling, 1948.
21. For a thoughtful expression of a biblical work ethic, see Charlie Self, *Flourishing Churches and Communities: A Pentecostal Primer on Faith, Work, and Economics for Spirit-Empowered Discipleship* (Grand Rapids: Christian's Library Press, 2013).

POSITION PAPER ON HOMOSEXUALITY, MARRIAGE, AND SEXUAL IDENTITY

(Adopted by the General Presbytery in session August 4-5, 2014)

Increasing political and religious advocacy for homosexual¹ practices, same-sex marriage, and alternate sexual identities has prompted us to clarify our position on these critical issues. We believe that all matters of faith and conduct must be evaluated

on the basis of Holy Scripture, which is our infallible guide (2 Timothy 3:16–17). Since the Bible does speak to the nature of human beings and their sexuality, it is imperative that the Church correctly understands and articulates what it actually teaches on these matters which have now become so controversial and divisive.

A reaffirmation of biblical teachings has become all the more urgent because writers sympathetic to the LGBT (Lesbian/Gay/Bisexual/Transgender)² communities have advanced revisionist interpretations of relevant biblical texts that are based upon biased exegesis and mistranslation. In effect, they seek to set aside almost two thousand years of Christian biblical interpretation and ethical teachings. We believe these efforts are reflective of the conditions described in 2 Timothy 4:3, “For the time will come when people will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear.”³ (See also v. 4.)

It should be noted at the outset that there is absolutely no affirmation of homosexual activity, same-sex marriage, or changes in sexual identity found anywhere in Scripture. Male and female genders are carefully defined and unconfused. The consistent ideal for sexual experience in the Bible is chastity⁴ for those outside a monogamous heterosexual marriage and fidelity⁵ for those inside such a marriage. There is also abundant evidence that homosexual behavior, along with illicit heterosexual behavior, is immoral and comes under the judgment of God.

We believe, in light of biblical revelation, that the growing cultural acceptance of homosexual identity and behavior (male and female), same-sex marriage, and efforts to change one’s biological sexual identity are all symptomatic of a broader spiritual disorder that threatens the family, the government, and the church.

This paper is a brief exposition of salient biblical teachings on homosexuality and the application of those teachings to marriage and sexual identity.

I. Homosexual Behavior Is Sin

Historically, homosexuality often has been defined as an emotional (psychological) or organic (physiological) problem. In recent years, some have lobbied mental health organizations to have homosexuality removed from the list of classified diagnostic pathologies, and many have come to see it as nothing more than a morally neutral personal preference or a naturally occurring aspect of human biological diversity. In making moral judgments, we must remember scriptural warnings against depending on our own reasoning or even personal experience to discern truth (Proverbs 3:5–6).

A. Homosexual behavior is sin because it is disobedient to scriptural teachings.

When God called Israel to be His people in a distinctive sense, He miraculously delivered them from Egyptian bondage. But God did more. He entered into a covenant relationship with them and provided the Law, predicated on love for God and neighbor, by which they could order their lives as a holy people. That law included specific prohibitions of homosexual practice, such as that of Leviticus 18:22: “Do not have sexual relations with a man as one does with a woman; that is detestable.” Lest the previous injunction be misunderstood, Leviticus 20:13 provides a restatement, “If a man has sexual relations with a man as one does with a woman, both of them have done what is detestable.” “Detestable,” used in both verses, is a strong word that indicates divine displeasure with sin.⁶

The Christian church has historically understood that although the ceremonial provisions of the Old Testament law were no longer in effect after the atoning death of Christ, the New Testament interpretation and restatement of its moral law continues in effect. On the subject of homosexuality, both the Old and New Testaments speak with one voice. The moral prohibitions against homosexual behavior in the Old Testament are pointedly repeated in the New Testament.

To those who witnessed on a daily basis the sexual license of imperial Rome, Paul depicted the results that followed in the lives of those who rejected God and “worshiped

and served created things rather than the Creator. . . . Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural sexual relations⁷ for unnatural ones. In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations⁸ with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed shameful acts[9] with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their error” (Romans 1:25– 27). Paul is referring to both male homosexuality and lesbianism.

In Paul’s day, the city of Corinth was especially notorious for sexual immorality. It was not only a crossroads of commerce, but of all kinds of vice. Because the church was being established in this city, it was important that new Christians come to understand God’s moral order. The record is explicit. Paul wrote, “Do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God?” Then he continued, “Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral¹⁰ nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders . . . will inherit the kingdom of God” (1 Corinthians 6:9–10 [NIV, 1984]). In this case, Paul is understood to identify male homosexuals in both active and passive homosexual behavioral roles.¹¹

Paul wrote, “Law is not made for a righteous person, but for those who are lawless and rebellious, for the ungodly and sinners, for the unholy and profane, for those who kill their fathers or mothers, for murderers and immoral men and homosexuals”¹² (1 Timothy 1:9–10, NASB).¹³

An unbiased study of these passages makes it clear that Scripture consistently identifies homosexual behavior as sin. Not only do the Scriptures condemn more flagrant examples of homosexual violence and promiscuity, they also provide no support for the popular modern idea that loving and committed homosexual relationships between two long-term partners, even if legally married, are morally acceptable. Homosexual activities of every kind are contrary to the moral commandments God has given us.

B. Homosexual behavior is sin because it is contrary to God's created order for the family and human relationships.

The first chapter of the Bible says, "So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them" (Genesis 1:27). After God had created the male, He indicated it was not good for him to live alone (Genesis 2:18). So God created a companion for him (Genesis 2:18). It should be noted that the male's aloneness was not to be remedied by the creation of another male but by the creation of a female. God created two sexes, not just one, and each for the other.

When God brought the woman to Adam, Adam said, "This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called 'woman,' for she was taken out of man." Scripture then states, "That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh" (Genesis 2:23–24).

In creating humankind God established the order of sexuality by which the race was to develop. Psychologically, the relationship is sound. Physically, the relationship is natural. Sociologically, it establishes the foundation for the family. The biblical order for human sexual expression is that of an intimate physical relationship to be shared exclusively within a lifelong marriage covenant—a heterosexual and monogamous relationship.

When people choose to engage in homosexual behavior, they depart from the God-given nature of sexuality. Their unnatural sexual behavior is a sin against God, who established the order of sexuality (Romans 1:27). And the social unit they seek to establish is contrary to the divine instruction for the man to leave father and mother and be "united to his wife" (Genesis 2:24).

In Jesus' discussion with the Pharisees, He reiterated the order of sexuality that God established in the beginning: "Haven't you read... that at the beginning the Creator 'made them male and female,' and said, 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh'?" (Matthew 19:4–

5). He pointed out that the only alternative to heterosexual marriage is celibacy for the kingdom of heaven's sake (Matthew 19:10–12).

C. Homosexual behavior is sin that comes under divine judgment.

The name of the ancient city of Sodom¹⁴ has become a synonym for homosexual behavior. While other evils existed in this community, sodomy was prominent. The homosexuals of Sodom were so depraved that they threatened homosexual rape of Lot's guests. "Bring them ["the men who came to you"] out to us so that we can have sex¹⁵ with them," Lot was told (Genesis 19:5). The biblical record indicates that the mob became violent and tried to break down the door of Lot's house. Only divine intervention spared Lot and his household from their evil intentions, and God subsequently destroyed both Sodom and the neighboring city of Gomorrah (Genesis 19:4–11, 24–25).

God's punishment of these cities was of such severity that it is used as an illustration of divine judgment by both Peter (2 Peter 2:6) and Jude (7). Jude's commentary is particularly apt, "In a similar way, Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding towns gave themselves up to sexual immorality and perversion. They serve as an example of those who suffer the punishment of eternal fire."

The Book of Judges (19:1–30) records an incident in the ancient Benjamite city of Gibeah that has many similarities to the sin of Sodom. Certain "wicked men of the city" (19:22) sought to force a visiting Levite male into homosexual acts¹⁶ with them. Denied their insistent requests, the attackers finally settled for vicious sexual abuse and gang rape¹⁷ of the Levite's concubine that resulted in her death (19:25–30). The other tribes of Israel found the crime so repugnant that when the tribe of Benjamin refused to surrender the offenders, they eventually went to war—decimating the Benjamites (20:1–48).

These are particularly notorious examples of homosexual expression that undoubtedly most homosexual persons today would repudiate. It should be understood that while expressing abhorrence at such rapacious perversion, the biblical writers do not imply

that heterosexuals are not capable of sexual atrocities nor that most homosexuals are as depraved as the residents of those ancient cities. Nor should modern Christians draw those implications. It is important to note, however, that wherever homosexuality occurs in the biblical record it is an occasion of scandal and judgment. Homosexuality is never viewed in a positive light.

The biblical writers make it clear that practicing homosexuals, along with sexually immoral heterosexuals and all other unrepentant sinners, will not inherit the kingdom of God (1 Corinthians 6:9–10). Paul also described homosexual conduct as one evidence of God's judgment for humankind's corporate rebellion against Him (Romans 1:26–27). Jesus himself was explicit that at the end of the age "the Son of Man will send out his angels, and they will weed out of his kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil. They will throw them into the blazing furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Matthew 13:40–42).

II. Homosexual Behavior Is Sin for Which Reconciliation Is Possible

While Scripture makes it clear homosexual behavior is sin and comes under the judgment of God, it also indicates that those who are guilty of homosexual behavior or any other sin can be reconciled to God (2 Corinthians 5:17–21).

In the church at Corinth were former homosexuals who had been delivered from the power of sin by the grace of God. In 1 Corinthians 6:9, Paul listed homosexuals along with immoral heterosexuals as those who cannot inherit the kingdom of God. His grammar implies continuing sexually immoral activity until their conversion.

Verse 11 follows with a powerful contrast, "And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God." They had been homosexuals in orientation and behavior, but now the power of God's Spirit had radically transformed their lives, and the lives of their fellow heterosexual sinners.

Scripture makes clear that the efficacy of the death and resurrection of Christ is unlimited for those who accept it. There is no sin, sexual or otherwise, that cannot be cleansed. John the Baptist announced, “Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29).

The apostle Paul wrote, “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Corinthians 5:21).

The apostle John wrote, “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9).

Through the regenerating power of the Holy Spirit, people, regardless of the nature of their sin, can be made new creations in Christ Jesus (2 Corinthians 5:17). God’s plan of salvation is the same for all. The practicing homosexual who wants to be delivered from the penalty and power of sin must come to God in the same way all heterosexual sinners must come to God, in the same way all who are now His children have come for deliverance from their sins.

The act of turning to God for salvation includes both repentance and faith. Jesus is both Savior and Lord. He is the one who forgives our sin as we believe in Him and repent. Repentance represents a change of mind in which there is a turning from sin in both attitude and behavior.

Jesus is also the One whose lordship we affirm in holy living. “It is God’s will that you should be sanctified: that you should avoid sexual immorality; that each of you should learn to control your own body in a way that is holy and honorable, not in passionate lust like the pagans, who do not know God” (1 Thessalonians 4:3–5).

Like the Philippian jailer who asked what he had to do to be saved, those desiring salvation must believe in the Lord Jesus Christ (Acts 16:30–31)—believe that He can save from the power as well as the penalty of sin. Obedient faith, like repentance, is a condition of salvation.

III. Resultant Affirmations

In view of the clear biblical teachings on homosexuality and the application of these teachings to contemporary sexual practices, the Assemblies of God Fellowship makes the following affirmations:

A. With Regard to Same-Sex Marriage

The Assemblies of God defines marriage as the permanent, exclusive, comprehensive, and conjugal “one flesh” union of one man and one woman, intrinsically ordered to procreation and biological family, and in furtherance of the moral, spiritual, and public good of binding father, mother, and child. (Genesis 1:27–28; 2:18–24; Matthew 19:4–9; Mark 10:5–9; Ephesians 5:31–33).

B. With Regard to Sexual Immorality

The Assemblies of God believes that sexual acts outside of marriage are prohibited as sinful. Sexual acts outside of marriage include but are not limited to adultery, fornication, incest, bestiality, pornography, prostitution, voyeurism, pedophilia, exhibitionism, sodomy, polygamy, polyamory, or same-sex sexual acts. (Exodus 20:14; Leviticus 18:7–23; 20:10–21; Deuteronomy 5:18; Matthew 5:27–28; 15:19; Romans 1:26–27; 1 Corinthians 6:9–13; Galatians 5:19; Ephesians 4:17–19; Colossians 3:5; 1 Thessalonians 4:3; Hebrews 13:4).

C. With Regard to Sexual Identity

The Assemblies of God believes that God created humankind in His image: male (man) and female (woman), sexually different but with equal personal dignity. The Fellowship supports the dignity of individual persons affirming their biological sex and discouraging any and all attempts to physically change, alter, or disagree with their predominant biological sex—including but not limited to elective sex-reassignment, transvestite, transgender, or nonbinary “genderqueer” acts or conduct. (Genesis 1:26–28; Romans 1:26–32; 1 Corinthians 6:9–11).

D. With Regard to Sexual Orientation

The Assemblies of God affirms the sexual complementarity of man and woman and teaches that any and all same-sex sexual attractions are to be resisted. Consequently, believers are to refrain from any and all same-sex sexual acts or conduct, which are intrinsically disordered. (Genesis 1:27; 2:24; Matthew 19:4–6; Mark 10:5–9; Romans 1:26–27; 1 Corinthians 6:9–11).

IV. A Word to the Church

The Assemblies of God believes that all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God and should seek redemption through confession, repentance, baptism, and faith in Jesus Christ. Our Fellowship welcomes and treats with respect, compassion, and sensitivity all who experience same-sex attractions or confess sexually immoral acts and are committed to resisting sexual temptation, refraining from sexual immorality, and transforming their behavior in the light of biblical teachings. (Matthew 11:28–30; Romans 3:23; 1 Corinthians 10:13; Ephesians 2:1–10; Hebrews 2:17–18; 4:14–16)

Believers who struggle with homosexual temptations and sexual identity confusion must be encouraged and strengthened by fellow Christians (Galatians 6:1–2). Likewise, they should be taught that while temptation to sinful behaviors is universal, temptation itself is not sin. Temptation can be resisted and overcome (1 Corinthians 10:13; Hebrews 12:1–6).

The moral imperatives of Scripture are incumbent upon all persons. However, believers should not be surprised that unbelievers do not honor God and do not recognize the Bible as a rightful claim on their lives and conduct (1 Corinthians 1:18). Peter writes clearly of the conflict and contrast between believer and unbeliever in his first letter:

Therefore, since Christ suffered in his body, arm yourselves also with the same attitude, because whoever suffers in the body is done with sin. As a result, they do not live the rest of their earthly lives for evil human desires, but rather for the will of God. For you

have spent enough time in the past doing what pagans choose to do—living in debauchery, lust, drunkenness, orgies, carousing and detestable idolatry. They are surprised that you do not join them in their reckless, wild living, and they heap abuse on you. But they will have to give account to him who is ready to judge the living and the dead (1 Peter 4:1–5).

As Christians we must both exhort believers to live in moral purity and express in word and deed Christ's love for the lost. Aware of the claims of God on every aspect of our lives, we must emphasize that we are called to holiness. To unbelievers we must reach out with compassion and humility. We must hold no malice toward, or fear of, homosexuals and those struggling with sexual identity—such attitudes are not of Christ. At the same time we must not condone sexual behavior, homosexual or heterosexual, that God has defined as sinful.

Christians should also do all they can to assist the person who has struggled with homosexual behaviors and desires to change and find deliverance. Change is not always easy but it is possible. It may require the help of others in the body of Christ, such as counselors and pastors, as well as a supportive church fellowship. Christian organizations are also available to help those who seek to change their lifestyles.

We desire all to be reconciled to God—to experience the peace and joy that stems from the forgiveness of sin through a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. God does not want any to perish in their sins; He invites all to accept His offer of eternal life (John 3:16). As part of His church, we issue that invitation to life in Christ to everyone.

Notes

1. The term homosexuality is frequently used to describe both orientation and behavior. In this paper, homosexual orientation is understood to mean sexual attraction to other members of the same sex. Homosexual behavior is understood to mean participation in sexual activity with another of the same sex. Homosexual orientation may pose temptations to lustful thinking and behavior, like heterosexual temptations, that are not necessarily acted upon and that may be resisted and overcome in the power of the Holy Spirit. Only homosexual lust and homosexual behaviors are understood in this study to be sinful.

2. Some sexual preference groups may prefer a different designation but, in the absence of a universally agreed-upon term, LGBT, generally understood in contemporary circles, is used here to include all “nonstraight” communities.”
3. All biblical citations are from the New International Version unless otherwise noted.
4. Here meaning to refrain from illicit sexual activity.
5. Here meaning sexual faithfulness and exclusivity in marriage.
6. The Hebrew word found here, to’ebah, is also used in this chapter of Leviticus for various abominable sexual practices of Israel’s pagan neighbors (18:26–27,29–30). Elsewhere in the Old Testament, it denotes such repugnant practices as idolatry, human sacrifice, and witchcraft. See R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer, and Bruce K. Waltke, eds., *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), 2:976–77. It is not uncommon for revisionists to attempt to explain away the plain meaning of the text by assuming the homosexual acts to be judged wrong only because they were associated with pagan religious practices forbidden to Israel. However, nothing in the passages cited supports this interpretation and the fact that homosexual practice is implicitly or explicitly condemned wherever it appears in the biblical text negates this interpretation.
7. “[N]atural intercourse,” New Revised Standard Version (NRSV); Greek chresis has to do with sexual intercourse in such contexts. See *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd edition, revised and edited by Frederick William Danker (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 1089.
8. Ibid.
9. Greek aschemosyne, “shameless deed.” See *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 147.
10. It is important to note that Scripture is even-handed in condemning heterosexual sins as well. Along with homosexuality, the apostle Paul includes such heterosexual sins as adultery, fornication, and prostitution. (See also such passages as Galatians 5:19–21 and 1 Timothy 1:10.) The Assemblies of God stands against all sexual immorality, heterosexual or homosexual, and calls all participants to repentance.
11. “[M]ale prostitutes” is translated from the Greek plural of malakos; “homosexual offenders” is translated from the plural of arsenokoites. The terms are defined respectively as “the passive male partner in sexual intercourse” and “the male partner in sexual intercourse” in Johannes P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida, eds., *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains*, 2nd edition (New York: United Bible Societies; 1988, 1989) 1:772. See also the respective entries in *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*.
12. Plural of arsenokoites.
13. New American Standard Bible.
14. Some modern interpreters claim that Sodom was condemned in Scripture only for its general wickedness, not for a reputation of pervasive homosexual behavior. They also conclude from Hebrews 13:2 (“some people have shown

hospitality to angels without knowing it”) and Matthew 10:14–15 (“shake the dust off your feet”) that the sin of Sodom was nothing more than inhospitality. It is further claimed that even if the references to Sodom describe homosexual behavior, it is actually male rape, not consensual homosexual relations, that are denounced. While the Genesis account does not answer all our questions, it is clear from the story itself and the many references in both Testaments that promiscuous and violent homosexuality is in view.

15. “[H]ave sex” is in this context an accurate translation of the Hebrew *yada’*, which means “to know” but is frequently used as a euphemism for sexual intercourse (Genesis 4:1, NRSV). The word is also used to denote sodomy (Genesis 19:5; Judges 19:22) and rape (Judges 19:25). See *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, 1:366.

POSITION PAPER ON INSPIRATION, INERRANCY, AND AUTHORITY OF SCRIPTURE

(Adopted by the General Presbytery in session August 1-3, 2015)

The Assemblies of God understanding of Scripture has long been stated in the first article of the Fellowship’s Statement of Fundamental Truths: “The Scriptures, both the Old and New Testaments, are verbally inspired of God and are the revelation of God to man, the infallible, authoritative rule of faith and conduct (2 Timothy 3:15-17; 1 Thessalonians 2:13; 2 Peter 1:21)” (KJV).¹

Explanation of Terms

We therefore understand the Bible to be the very Word of God in that God himself revealed His will and purposes to chosen writers (Amos 3:8) who faithfully and precisely recorded what had been revealed to them for eventual and providential inclusion in our canon of sixty-six books.

We understand inspiration to mean that special act of the Holy Spirit by which He guided the writers of the Scriptures. Such superintendence influenced both their

thoughts and their actual choice of words, yet also made full allowance for the divergent backgrounds, abilities, and personalities of the writers. Moreover, inspiration applies to all they wrote as it is found in the canon of Scripture.

We understand infallibility to mean that the Scriptures are true and reliable in what they intend to assert. Inerrancy is a near synonym to infallibility and has been used more recently to further attest that Scripture as recorded in the original manuscripts, the autographs, is without error. Being without error and completely truthful, the Scriptures are absolutely trustworthy (2 Samuel 7:28; Psalm 119:160; John 17:17; Colossians 1:5). Infallibility and inerrancy likewise apply to all of the Scriptures.

We understand authority to mean that everything the Bible affirms and teaches is true. As God's disclosed will and purpose, it is determinative for belief and behavior. Therefore, the affirmation that the Bible is the "authoritative rule of faith and conduct" is understood to call for accepting the Scriptures as the final and unchanging authority for doctrine and ethics.

Biblical Considerations

The starting point for a correct understanding of the doctrine of Scripture is the Bible itself which bears repeated and powerful witness to its own nature. It clearly claims divine authority and full inspiration.

The teaching of Jesus is foundational for our understanding. He is quoted in Matthew 5:18, "For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished."² Whether we take this allusion to the Hebrew alphabet literally or figuratively, the force is the same. Jesus thought of the Scriptures as being eternally significant even in their slightest detail. If Jesus did not believe in the full inspiration and infallibility of the Scriptures, the force of His argument is lost.

Jesus' insistence on the truthfulness and authority of every part of the Scriptures is seen in other passages as well. In John 10:34–38, He points to a brief statement from the Psalms (82:6) and argues that neither it nor the other parts of the Law can be broken. If Jesus had thought of the Scriptures as being only partially inspired and subject to errors of detail, He certainly would not have spoken as He did. In Matthew 22:32, the validity of Christ's statement rests on a precise scriptural detail, namely, the present tense of the verb, "I am." In His questioning of the Pharisees in Matthew 22:43–45, the force of the dialogue rests on the use of one word, "Lord."

Jesus' confidence in the details of Scripture is reflected in the New Testament Epistles as well. For example, in Galatians 3:16, Paul depends on a distinguishing of number—singular and plural—"seed" versus "seeds," for the force of his argument. Such reliance on minute details involving tenses, particular words, and singular and plural, are meaningful only in light of fully inspired Scriptures that are inerrant even in their detail.

One of the most forceful statements on the full inspiration of the Scriptures is found in 2 Timothy 3:16. This passage, as translated by many English versions (KJV, NASB, NLT, NRSV, NET, et al.) begins "All [or "every"] Scripture is inspired by God" [or "given by inspiration of God"]. However, the Greek term translated "inspired" is *theopneustos*, literally "God-breathed." The NIV more vividly translates "God-breathed"; the ESV similarly reads "breathed out by God." *Theopneustos* points to God as the source of Scripture but also signifies that Scripture remains vibrant as the Spirit of God continuously makes God's Word alive to receptive readers and hearers. The writer to the Hebrews expresses a similar understanding, "For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart" (Hebrews 4:12).

What should also be noted about the nature of "God-breathed" Scripture is its immediate and practical relevance to the life of the people of God. Paul goes on to say that it "is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that

the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work” (2 Timothy 3:16–17). The inspired Word is intended to enter into and order every aspect of the public and private beliefs and behavior of Christians.

This passage also asserts that what is true of one part of Scripture is true of all the Scriptures; that is, the Scriptures in part and in whole are uniquely the product of God. The Scriptures at the time Paul wrote to Timothy were what we know as the Old Testament. But, Paul called Timothy to include in the understanding of Scripture “my [Paul’s] teaching, my way of life, my purpose, faith, patience, love, endurance” (3:10). Moreover, Paul went on to challenge Timothy to “continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of” (3:14). From infancy he had been instructed in “the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus” (3:15). So Paul includes in his “all Scripture” the message he had been given and had preached, the message that formed the basis for the New Testament. And Peter, in fact, asserts that Paul’s letters are among the Scriptures (2 Peter 3:15–16).

Another important passage that provides a great deal of insight on the function and nature of inspiration is 2 Peter 1:21, “For prophecy never had its origin in the human will, but prophets, though human, spoke from God as they were carried along (pheromenoi) by the Holy Spirit.” In context, this verse suggests the uniqueness of the Scriptures when compared to humanly inspired statements and declares “the prophetic message as something completely reliable” (1:19). The persons who wrote the Scriptures did so by means of a unique and powerful action of the Holy Spirit.

So the uniform witness of the Scriptures is clear: God communicated to the mind of the writer (revelation); the Holy Spirit guided the transmission of His revelation into words (inspiration); and, through the continuing activity of the Holy Spirit (illumination), we receive the original revelation as we encounter the Scriptures.

Implications of the Doctrine

The claim that the Scriptures are the revelation of God to humans, the authoritative rule of faith and conduct, demands that they be seen as worthy of such affirmation. Would God provide humans with a flawed instrument by which to direct their lives? Would He not ensure that the source of faith and conduct be without error, fully trustworthy? He has inspired writers by the Holy Spirit and in that process given for our direction and guidance texts that are fully reliable to guide us to salvation, worship, and service.

It is noteworthy that the Scriptures repeatedly claim to be “God's Word.” The Old Testament is abundant with such phrases as “and God said” (Genesis 1:3, 6, 9, 14, 20, 24), “This is what the LORD says” (Exodus 4:22; 1 Samuel 2:27; and over four hundred additional passages), and “The word of the Lord came” (Genesis 15:1, 4; 1 Samuel 15:10; Jeremiah 1:2, 4, 11, 13). In other passages, Scripture is equated directly with divine authorship: “It says” (Romans 3:19; 15:10; 1 Peter 2:6); “It is written” (Matthew 4:4, 6, 10; Acts 1:20); and “Scripture says” (Romans 9:17; 10:11; 11:2). This shows that God's voice, spoken to the prophets, is equated with the Scriptures. The writers claim to be writing God's words.

Moreover, the Scriptures also repeatedly claim to be “truth,” as vividly expressed in Jesus' high priestly prayer: “your word is truth” [alētheia, not alēthēs; that is, “truth,” not “true”] (John 17:17). The Old Testament regularly reiterated God's truthfulness: “God is not human, that he should lie” (Numbers 23:19); “Sovereign Lord, you are God! Your covenant is trustworthy, and you have promised these good things to your servant” (2 Samuel 7:28); “Your word, Lord, is eternal; it stands firm in the heavens” (Psalm 119:89); and “Every word of God is flawless” (Proverbs 30:5). Similar passages from the New Testament are found in Paul's teaching about “God, who does not lie” (Titus 1:2) and in the letter to the Hebrews that similarly notes “it is impossible for God to lie” (Hebrews 6:18). Truth is an attribute of God; the Spirit of God is the Spirit of truth (John 14:17; 15:26; 16:13).

In asserting the inerrancy of the Scriptures, we refer to the autographs (the original manuscripts as they first came from the author[s]). Strict inerrancy is claimed only for the original writings. Those original manuscripts, of course, no longer exist; however, their wording can be determined with amazing precision. Experts in textual criticism throughout the centuries have carried out, and continue, rigorous comparisons of thousands of ancient biblical texts to carefully determine the original. The Bible is, in fact, the best-attested book of antiquity and we are assured of a reliable text that is indeed trustworthy. Moreover, it demonstrates God's providential care in the exacting, painstaking work of faithful scribes and scholars through the centuries.

We can also be assured that our major translations of the Bible, to the extent they are faithful to the original texts, reliably communicate the infallible Word of God today. The reader can trust that these major translations have been made by, and are continuously reviewed by, reputable scholars who are committed to the task of conveying accurately the Word of God from the original languages to modern readers.

It is important to note that claims of inerrancy are directed toward what Scripture affirms and asserts rather than information that is merely accurately reported. The Bible does correctly record false statements by ungodly people (e.g., the comforters of Job) and even the words of Satan (e.g., Genesis 3:1–5). The biblical writers also on occasion quote from noncanonical and noninspired writings, which would show the truthfulness of that quoted but not extend authoritativeness to the source (e.g., Jude's use of the Assumption of Moses and the Book of Enoch). Likewise, every act recorded in Scripture is not thereby to be considered in keeping with God's divine order.

The inerrancy of the Scriptures must also be considered in light of their historical and cultural setting. The Bible comes to us from the Ancient Near East, a culture and time far distant from the present. Thus the scientific exactness in numbers and quotations that are expected of contemporary technical writing may not be applicable to the biblical texts.

As modern authors often do, the biblical writers used the language of appearance to describe their world. That is, they wrote from their perspective and not in technical terms. So, for example, they could talk (as moderns still do) about the sun “rising” or “setting” and be fully truthful. With regard to miracles, the writers tell us what they saw and experienced without trying to explain the mystery in scientific terms. So, for example, the miracle of the crossing of the Red Sea is reported matter-of-factly, “the Lord drove the sea back with a strong east wind and turned it into dry land” (Exodus 14:21–31). Other Old and New Testament miracles were likewise reported just as they were observed. The writers report the mighty acts of God which they experienced and attribute those acts to His gracious intervention. Their ultimate goal in writing is to call their readers to the same faith they exemplified in their mighty God.

The inerrancy of the Scriptures is not invalidated by the use of multiple figures of speech and various literary genres. Parables, analogies, allegories, similes, metaphors, hyperboles, symbols, etc., are to be found throughout the Bible. Among others, the writers employed narrative, poetic, apocalyptic, prophetic, didactic, and epistolary genres as they conveyed the truth of God. Accurate interpretation of the biblical texts requires careful attention to their literary form.

In that the Holy Spirit used humans in the process of producing the Scriptures, it is to be understood that the human authors employed their particular grammatical skills. So, finding what might be considered by moderns as incorrect grammatical constructions does not in any way detract from biblical inerrancy.

To find in the Bible items that are not presently understandable or that may seem erroneous or contradictory does not mean that the Bible is in error. Again and again, advancing historical, archaeological, and philological studies have verified biblical reports once claimed to be erroneous. The historical details of the Bible have an amazing record of validation. Humility requires us to continue to search for understanding when confronted with the occasional problematic passage and not peremptorily misjudge the Scriptures as containing error.

The personal God of creation, redemption, and consummation so desired to communicate with the people He created that He chose to make himself known. He superintended the conveyance of that revelatory activity to writing in such a powerful manner that it is fully trustworthy. He continues in the power of the Holy Spirit to illumine His written revelation to the hearts and minds of people who open themselves to reading, hearing, and obeying the Bible in its life-giving force.

Historical Considerations

With regard to the doctrine of inspiration, just as other salient doctrines of the Christian Church, it is important to understand what the Church has believed through the centuries. While discussion on the inerrancy of Scripture is primarily a phenomenon of more recent years, a survey of church history suggests that the church has long held a high view of the inspiration of the Scriptures with belief in infallibility and inerrancy implicit in that view.

During the Patristic Period, the Scriptures were considered to be the unique work of the Holy Spirit carrying forth a divine message. To the church fathers, inspiration extended even to the phraseology of the Bible. Thus, Clement of Alexandria underscored Christ's words in Matthew 5:18 by saying that not a jot or tittle shall pass away because the "mouth of the Lord the Holy Spirit hath spoken these things" (Protepticus [Exhortation to the Heathen], IX). Gregory Nazianzus suggests that the smallest lines in the Scriptures are due to the care of the Holy Spirit, and that we must be careful to consider every slightest shade of meaning (Oration 2, 105). Justin Martyr distinguished between human and divine inspiration and spoke of the divine Word that moved the writers of the Scriptures (The First Apology, 36). Irenaeus asserted that we can be "most properly assured that the Scriptures are indeed perfect, since they were spoken by the Word of God and his Spirit" (Against Heresies 2.28.2). There can be little doubt that the early fathers had a very high view of inspiration, and that this view extended to the minute details of the Scriptures.

The Reformers, in a search for authority, readily accepted the doctrine of inspiration and, by implication, infallibility and inerrancy. Zwingli appealed both to the Old Testament and New Testament in his defense of pure Christian doctrine (see his, *On the Clarity and Certainty of the Word of God*). Calvin asserted that because the Holy Spirit authenticates the Scriptures “we affirm with utter certainty (just as if we were gazing upon the majesty of God himself) that it has flowed to us from the very mouth of God by the ministry of men” (*Institutes*, I, 7, 5). Luther argued for a high view of inspiration and thought of the Scriptures as being above error (see his *Answer to Latomus*, 8.98.27). While the Reformers did not devote a decisive part of their theology to the subject of inspiration, it is conclusive that they accepted the full authority of the Scriptures.

The age of rationalism leveled its attack against the application of inspiration to the minutia, that is, the small details, of the Bible. In the spirit of the Renaissance, linguistic and textual studies flourished. The rationalistic approach suggested that if errors could be demonstrated to exist in the text of the Scriptures, the whole doctrine of inspiration would crumble. This kind of thinking ignited a rash of claims that the Bible was full of errors, its critics hoping thereby to destroy the whole doctrine of inspiration.

The response to the charges that the Scriptures are filled with error is first to appeal to the claims of Scripture itself as has been done in this paper. If we accept that the Scriptures are the Word of God, as clearly stated in the biblical text, that Word must take precedence over our rationalizations. The Scriptures are inerrant because they are inspired of God—not inspired because they are inerrant. The first approach is biblical and leads to a correct view of inspiration and infallibility; the second approach is rationalistic and opens the door to human speculations.

The Authority of Scripture

We affirm that God has provided for all time an inspired, inerrant, and authoritative record of His revelation in the Bible, our Holy Scriptures.³ We hold that the Scriptures

are God's sufficient and authoritative disclosure for the salvation of all people, and therefore are authoritative for belief, teaching, and practice. The Scriptures define the believer's worldview, morality, and ethics. Moreover, the Scriptures are not simply one authority among others; they are the final authority. The Holy Spirit, who inspired the writers in their task of recording the revelation of God, breathes life into and through the writings so that they continue to speak with clarity and authority to the contemporary reader. He does not speak through supposed prophets or religious leaders to teach any belief or action not validated in the Scriptures. Accordingly, we reject any contemporary philosophy, interpretive method, or purported prophecy that attempts to contravene or alter the nature and meaning of "the faith that was once for all entrusted to God's holy people" (Jude 3, 2 Peter 1:20–21).

We, the community of faith, come with humility to the biblical revelation, asking that the Holy Spirit speak through it, conforming our wills and worldviews to it. We grant absolute primacy to the biblical revelation, assured that it will guide us into all truth.

1. KJV refers to the King James Version of the Bible.
2. All Scripture quotations are from the New International Version (2011), unless otherwise noted.
3. The Bible is often referred to by using the singular "Scripture" to embrace the entire canon of sixty-six books. It may also be designated "the Scriptures," recognizing the multiplicity of books but at the same time, their formation into one unitary canon. In popular usage, one verse or passage may well be called "a scripture."

POSITION PAPER ON THE KINGDOM OF GOD

(Adopted by the General Presbytery in session August 9-11, 2010)

The terms *kingdom of God* and *kingdom of heaven* are frequently found in Holy Scripture and in contemporary Christian usage. Yet there is widespread disagreement on the meaning and application of the terms. Some of this disagreement is a simple matter of interpretation on minor points, but some of it is crucial, challenging even the fundamental tenets of traditional evangelical and Pentecostal beliefs. For this reason it is appropriate to articulate those essential aspects of the kingdom of God that are commonly held by the Assemblies of God.

Linguistic Meaning of the Term Kingdom

The primary meaning of *malkuth* (Hebrew) and *basileia* (Greek) is the authority, reign, or rule of a king. The territory, subjects, and operations of the kingdom are secondary meanings.

The kingdom of God is the sphere of God's rule (Psalm 22:28).¹ Though rightfully under God's rule, fallen human beings nonetheless participate in universal rebellion against God and His authority (1 John 5:19; Revelation 11:17,18). However, by faith and obedience men and women turn from their rebellion, are regenerated by the Holy Spirit, and become a part of the Kingdom and its operation. While participation in the kingdom of God is not compulsory, the Kingdom is present, whether or not people recognize and accept it.

The Kingdom is variously described as "kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 13:11), "kingdom of God" (Mark 4:11), "kingdom of Christ and of God" (Ephesians 5:5), and "kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ" (Revelation 11:15). Jesus sometimes spoke of it as "my

kingdom” (Luke 22:30). Paul, referring to Christ Jesus, called it “his kingdom” (2 Timothy 4:1). All these terms refer to the one kingdom of God.

The Kingdom of God in the Old Testament

“Kingdom of the Lord” occurs once in the Old Testament: *malkuth* Yahweh (1 Chronicles 28:5). There are of course many occurrences of “kingdom” denoting earthly territory or domain. “Dominion” or “rule” is occasionally the translation for the idea of God’s authority and power (Psalms 22:28; 66:7; 103:19; 145:11–13). Throughout the Old Testament (but especially in the Psalms and the Prophets) the idea of God as King ruling over His creation and over Israel is clearly expressed. Although God’s immediate kingship is evident in the Old Testament, there is also a strong emphasis on a future fulfillment of God’s universal rule. This anticipation often coincides with messianic expectations associated with both the first and second advents (cf. Isaiah 9:6,7; 11:1–12; 24:21–23; 45:22,23; Zechariah 14:9). Daniel describes God’s rule as “an eternal dominion” and a “kingdom [that] endures from generation to generation.” (4:34).

The Kingdom in the New Testament

While the idea of the universal rule of God permeates the Old Testament, the kingdom of God takes on additional meaning and importance in the teaching and ministry of Jesus that begins with the proclamation, “The kingdom of God is near” (Mark 1:15; cf. Matthew 3:2; 4:17). Although Jesus never specifically defined the Kingdom, He illustrated it through parables (Matthew 13; Mark 4) and demonstrated its presence and power in His ministry. He instructed His disciples to proclaim the nearness of the Kingdom as He sent them out in missionary ministry (Matthew 10:7; Luke 9:2; 10:9,11). Every description of Jesus Christ as Lord is a reminder that Christ is ruler of the kingdom of God.

From the various contexts of the word kingdom in the Gospels, the rule of God is seen as (1) a present realm or sphere into which people are entering now and (2) a future apocalyptic order into which the righteous will enter at the end of the age.

Thus the kingdom of God is both a present reality and a promise of future fulfillment. The Kingdom was present on earth in the person and acts of Jesus during the time of His Incarnation. After the Resurrection, the Risen Christ is present by His Spirit, and where His Spirit is, the Kingdom is present. While the Kingdom is manifested in the Church, the Kingdom is not limited to the Church. The fullness of the kingdom awaits a final apocalyptic arrival at the end of this age (Matthew 24:27,30,31; Luke 21:27–31).

The State of the Kingdom Now

Just as some who followed Jesus “thought that the kingdom of God was going to appear at once” (Luke 19:11), certain groups today are expecting Christians to usher in the fullness of the Kingdom in an earthly rule. When the Pharisees asked Jesus at what time the kingdom of God would come, He answered, “[T]he kingdom of God is within [entos, “within,” “in the midst,” or “among”] you” (Luke 17:21). The restored reign of God was soon to be a reality, for the One who was to reclaim the usurped territory was on earth to accomplish His work of redemption. The overthrow of Satan’s dominion had already begun. Today, the redemptive work is complete, yet the reality of the ultimate Kingdom is qualified. In the present age, the power of the Kingdom does not halt aging or death. Though God does at times miraculously overrule natural laws by sovereign act or in response to the prayer and faith of believers, the Kingdom still works through fallible human beings. The Church has a powerful healing influence on the world, but final restoration will not occur prior to the Second Coming. Righteous political and social actions vitally enhance public life, but the main thrust of the Kingdom is the spiritual transformation of persons who together form the body of Christ. The Millennium and the ultimate expressions of the Kingdom will not come without the physical return of Jesus Christ to the earth (Luke 21:31). The Kingdom is already present, but not yet complete. It is both present and future.

The interim between the first and second advents of Christ (the present age) is marked by forceful spiritual confrontation between the power of the Kingdom and the powers

that dominate the world in this present age. Putting on the full armor of God, believers must engage the forces of darkness (Ephesians 6:12).

We are not guaranteed total, instant success in this conflict. Each victory over sickness, sin, oppression, or the demonic is a reminder of the present power of the Kingdom and of the final victory to come, a victory made sure by the resurrection of Christ. We are called to wage war against sickness, but we face the reality that not everyone we pray for gets well. We do not surrender to the evil and the struggles of the present order; but neither do we rage against God or blame others when every request is not granted. The essence of the Spirit-energized life is to move against the forces of darkness, fully aware that total deliverance is always possible but does not always come immediately (cf Romans 8:18–23). Some of the heroes of faith (Acts 12:2; Acts 12:2; 2 Corinthians 11:23 to 12:10; Hebrews 11) suffered, even died, having their deliverance deferred to a future time. We do not give in to the ravages of evil. As instruments of the Kingdom in this present age, we faithfully battle against evil and suffering.

The Holy Spirit and the Kingdom of God

As Pentecostals we recognize the role of the Holy Spirit in the inauguration and ongoing ministry of the Kingdom. At His baptism, Jesus was anointed with the Spirit (Matthew 3:16; Mark 1:10; Luke 3:22). His acts of power, energized by God's Spirit, brought healing to the sick and spiritual restoration to sinful men and women. The descent of the Spirit at His baptism was a significant point in the ministry of Jesus. "Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the desert" (Luke 4:1). The working of the Spirit in the ministry of Jesus attested to the presence of the Kingdom.

Jesus described the role of the Holy Spirit in the kingdom of God. As part of the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy, He told His disciples, "You will be baptized with the Holy Spirit" (Acts 1:5). The power of the Kingdom, manifest in the Cross, the Resurrection, and the Ascension, was passed on to all who would be filled with the

Spirit. The age of the Spirit is the age of the Church, which being Spirit-created is also the community of the Spirit. Working primarily through the Church but without being confined to the Church, the Spirit continues the Kingdom ministry of Jesus himself.

The Kingdom as a Future Reality

Biblical charismata, anointed proclamation of the Word, and confirming signs and wonders are distinguishing marks of the kingdom of God, at work from the time of Christ until now. The kingdom of Satan has already been invaded by Jesus in the power of the Spirit (Matthew 12:25–29; Colossians 1:13; 2:15). Yet final destruction of Satan and complete victory over all evil is part of a future eschatological consummation (Revelation 20:10).

We believe in the premillennial return of Christ before the thousand-year period described in Revelation 20. We believe that we are living in the last days of the present age. The next major fulfillment of Bible prophecy will be the Rapture, at which time the dead in Christ will be resurrected and the Church will be caught up from the earth, forever to be with the Lord (1 Corinthians 15:51,52; 1 Thessalonians 4:14–17). We believe that the rapture of the Church is imminent (Mark 13:32–37), that it will take place before the Great Tribulation (1 Thessalonians 4:17,18; 5:9), and that it is the “blessed hope” (Titus 2:13) to which we look even while signs in the heavens and on earth signal the approaching end of this age (Luke 21:25–28).

The second coming of Christ not only includes the physical rapture of the saints but it is also followed by the visible return of Christ with His saints to reign on the earth for one thousand years (Zechariah 14:5; Matthew 24:27,30; Revelation 1:7; 19:11–14; 20:1–6). Satan will be bound and inactive for the first time since his rebellion and fall (Revelation 20:2). This millennial reign of Christ will institute a time of universal peace (Psalm 72:3–8; Isaiah 11:6–9; Micah 4:3–4) for the first time since before the fall of man. As promised in the Scriptures, “all Israel will be saved” (Romans 11:26) and brought into the millennial reign (Ezekiel 37:21,22; Zephaniah 3:19,20; Romans 11:26,27).

The Kingdom and the Church

The kingdom of God is not the Church. Yet there is an inseparable relationship between the two. The true Church is the Body of which Christ is the head (Ephesians 1:22,23; Colossians 1:18). It is a spiritual fellowship that includes all who have believed, or will believe, in Christ as Savior from the Church's inception until the time God takes it out of the world.

The kingdom of God existed before the beginning of the Church and will continue after the work of the Church is complete. The Church is therefore part of the Kingdom, but not all of it. In the present age the kingdom of God is at work most visibly through the Church. When the gospel of the Kingdom has been proclaimed "in the whole world as a testimony to all nations" (Matthew 24:14), the drama of end-time events will begin. Finally, Christ will reign in majesty over His eternal Kingdom, which will include the Church glorified.

The Kingdom of God and the Kingdoms of Earth

The kingdom of God and the kingdoms of this world exist side by side at the present time. However, these kingdoms will not be one and the same until Christ returns and the kingdoms of this world become "the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ" (Revelation 11:15). The kingdom of God may operate within, but is not to be identified with, any present political system. Believers take the gospel of the Kingdom into the world so that individuals may voluntarily choose the lordship of Jesus Christ.

While revealing that all human government is currently, to some extent, under the influence of the evil one (Daniel 10:13,20; John 12:31; 14:30; Ephesians 6:12; 1 John 5:19), the Bible nonetheless teaches that government is ordained by God to maintain order and punish evildoers (Romans 13:1–7). Governmental authorities are God's servants (Romans 13:6) whether they recognize it or not. Ideals of justice and decency found in government and society are the legacy of God's grace in the world (Romans

1:20; 2:14). Though they may be in rebellion, the kingdoms of the world are yet responsible to God and must be called to account for injustice and wickedness.

Although the kingdom of God is not a present political entity, the citizens of the Kingdom are responsible to exert a positive influence on their society. While the Bible does not give clear guidelines for Christian action in combating the social evils embedded in the structures of our society, and sincere believers will differ on the means to be employed, Christians clearly are to be salt and light (Matthew 5:13,14). They are to be concerned about the needy (James 1:27; 2:16) and the oppressed (James 5:4–6). Filled with the Spirit, and given the opportunity to influence society, they are impelled to denounce unjust laws (Isaiah 10:1,2) and to seek justice and goodness (Amos 5:14,15; Micah 6:8).

At the same time, and without contradiction of their servant role, God's children should be in the world, but not of it (John 17:11,14,16). The kingdom of God (God's rule in our lives) is demonstrated in and through us by "righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit" (Romans 14:17).

The kingdom of God is not the blueprint for a radical cultural change based on some carnal theocratic or revolutionary agenda. Instead, it radically changes human personalities and lives. Through men and women who recognize its authority and live by its standards, the kingdom of God invades the stream of history. This process began with godly preflood humans, found early expression in theocratic Israel, drew near in the person of the Messiah, has been advancing through the Church, and will be completed in the dominion of Christ at the end of the age.

Erroneous Views of the Kingdom of God

Doctrines regarding the kingdom of God tend to err toward one of two extremes. One extreme assumes that the Kingdom accomplishes too little during the Church Age. The other maintains that the Kingdom accomplishes too much. Some emphasize the heavenly nature of the Kingdom, and expect little supernatural expression on earth.

Since the fulfillment of the Kingdom is yet future, the Church may too quickly retreat from social and civic responsibility. Others locate the Kingdom primarily on earth. They claim that most of the supernatural power of the Kingdom is currently available to a militant Church and that the fulfillment of the Kingdom will occur during the Church Age. Both of these extremes must be avoided.

Your Kingdom Come

Christ taught His disciples to pray, “Your kingdom come” (Matthew 6:10). The Kingdom is already among us in that it has invaded Satan’s domain and has assured final victory. The Kingdom comes in a measure whenever a person receives Christ as Savior, is healed or delivered, or is touched in any way by the divine. Yet the future consummation of the kingdom of God—the time when all evil and rebellion will be eliminated—is the fervent hope of the Christian. So with the disciples we pray, “Your kingdom come”—both now and when Christ returns.

The rapture of the Church, the coming of Christ for His own, will set in motion the events that lead to the consummation of the eternal Kingdom. “The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign for ever and ever” (Revelation 11:15). With John the beloved revelator we say, “Amen. Come, Lord Jesus” (Revelation 22:20).

Notes

1. All Bible quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are from the New International Version (NIV).

POSITION PAPER ON LEADERSHIP AND GOVERNANCE IN THE LOCAL CHURCH

(Adopted by the Assemblies of God General Presbytery in Session July 30, 2019)

Introduction

The apostle Paul, teaching the Corinthians about the true nature of the Church, affirmed that “no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ” (1 Corinthians 3:11). Any discussion of leadership and governance in the local church must both begin and conclude with this declaration of revealed truth. The church in every generation must consider how it might best build upon the foundation of Christ. This consideration includes the ways by which leadership is chosen, equipped, and mobilized, and then the forms and methodology by which it carries out its God-given work and mission.

Leadership that conforms to New Testament qualifications and expresses itself in concert with proper models of governance will provide for the local church a pathway of progress that will build the kingdom of God and exalt Jesus Christ, the foundation of the Church.

Governance models in the New Testament suggest a great deal of flexibility and fluidity. Patterns of governance in the Early Church are descriptive (what was) and not prescriptive (what should be). Structure and models of governance in the New Testament were consequential to the work of the Holy Spirit in the life of the Early Church. As the Spirit moved in dramatic ways, organizational systems (appointment of deacons, elders, bishops, etc.) were put in place to support and sustain that work of the Spirit. Form followed function. The “work of ministry” held precedence over the “organization” of ministry.

The New Testament church exemplified shared and participatory leadership. The apostle Paul traveled with a team of coworkers. He organized elders (plural) in the churches he began. He corresponded with the churches he founded to assure the soundness of doctrine and the proper practice of the life of faith. Acts 15 records the actions of a deliberative body in setting forth guidelines and accepted practices in the Early Church. The apostles penned epistles and sent them as circular letters to the churches scattered across the then-known world. At every turn, leadership was not only “prophetic” and “apostolic,” but it was also shared and participatory.

Accountability is essential for any model of governance to be effective. No minister is an island unto himself/herself. No minister dare think that faithful ministry can be sustained and adequately expressed without appropriate patterns and systems of accountability. It is the responsibility of the minister to provide the kind of leadership that will establish an atmosphere and climate of accountability.

Biblical Evidence of Leadership in the Local Church

Priestly ministry was a significant part of Israel's history. During the time of the patriarchs, the heads of families and tribes performed priestly functions (Genesis 8:20; 26:25). Later a priestly class arose belonging to the family of Aaron. The role of the priests was that of mediators between God and the people. As such, they occupied a special and unique place in the life of ancient Israel.

The New Testament extends the priestly function to all believers (1 Peter 2:5, 9; Revelation 1:5–6). During the Reformation, the doctrine of the “priesthood of all believers” became fundamental to Protestant theology. This truth is the theological and biblical foundation for shared governance. Since all believers are to function in a priestly role, it follows that plurality in leadership should be the norm. It is this understanding that gives credence to congregational involvement in church governance.

After the Spirit upon Moses was shared with the seventy elders gathered at the tent of meeting to equip them to assist in serving the people (Numbers 11:24–30), the Spirit

impacted two men within the camp. Moses' response to that was "I wish that all the Lord's people were prophets and that the Lord would put his Spirit on them" (Numbers 11:29). This prophetic statement began to be fulfilled on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:1–4) and continues to this day. Peter's sermon on Pentecost, based on Joel 2:28–32, affirmed that the Lord had poured His Spirit out on all people, enabling them to prophesy (Acts 2:17–21).

New Testament Nomenclature for Leadership in the Local Church

Elder (*presbyteros*)

The New Testament practice of appointing elders reaches at least back to the time of Moses (Exodus 3:16; 4:29; 17:5). They continued to fulfill administrative functions into the days of Israel's kings (Judges 21:16; Ruth 4:2; 1 Samuel 30:26; 2 Samuel 3:17), even into the period of captivity (Jeremiah 29:1; Ezekiel 14:1). In the Hasmonean period, elders are found among the emerging Sanhedrin and were thought to be a continuation of the Seventy appointed by Moses (Numbers 11:16–17). In the New Testament Gospels and Acts, elders are associated with the scribes and chief priests.

The first-century church found in the traditional office of the elder a convenient pattern for leadership in the church. Elders supported James in his pastoral work in Jerusalem (Acts 11:30; 21:17–19) and played a significant role in the decisions of the church at large (Acts 15:2). Peter addressed elders in his first epistle and seems to number himself among them (1 Peter 5:1). Paul enhanced the leadership of elders in the province of Asia by their appointment in every city where the church had been established (Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5).

Overseer/Bishop (*episkopos*)

The term, *episkopos*, "overseer," sometimes translated "bishop," is often used interchangeably with the term "elder" (compare Acts 20:17 and 20:28; Titus 1:5 and 1:7) and probably designates the leaders of local congregations. The term "elder" may refer

more to title and office and the designation “overseer” to the function and practice of that office. As the church multiplied and developed, so did the need for appropriate oversight and administration. The term “bishop” became increasingly popular over the first several centuries as the title for those who extended their leadership beyond local borders. It is important to note that the New Testament does not teach an “apostolic succession” or transfer of spiritual authority based on privileged birth or ecclesiastical status.

Pastor/Teacher (*poimen/didaskalos*)

Paul, in Ephesians 4:11, identifies the pastors and teachers (one role) among the gifts of Christ for the equipping and building up of His Body. The pastor is responsible for the life of the believing community, and teaching is a vital aspect of this office. The use of *poimen*, shepherd, to describe this vital role in the Church evokes the image of sheep needing a shepherd. Jesus was/is the Good Shepherd (John 10:1–18), and He gives those with the same shepherding function to nurture the local congregation.

The congregation needs sound teaching from their “pastor/shepherd” that will lead them to “reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ” (Ephesians 4:13). Such teaching will prevent their being easily turned aside from the truth by every false teaching that comes along (Ephesians 4:14).

The apostle Paul, addressing the elders of the church at Ephesus, whom he also called overseers (Acts 20:17, 28), described their function as shepherding “the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers.” He charged the elders to keep watch over themselves and the congregation, protecting them from the incursions of those who would try to divert them from the truth of the gospel message.

Deacon (*diakonos*)

The term *diakonos* denotes service such as that of waiting on tables. A deacon by definition is a “servant.” The apostle Paul referred to himself as a servant or a “deacon” (1 Corinthians 3:5; Ephesians 3:7), a description also used of Jesus (Romans 15:8–9).

From Philippians 1:1, the term “servant” (*diakonos*) was commonly used to describe leadership in the apostolic church. A household attendant was referred to as a *diakonos* (Matthew 22:13). The apostle Paul spoke of Timothy as a good “minister”—the word is *diakonos* (1 Timothy 4:6). Some suggest that the seven who were chosen to “wait on tables” in Acts 6 form the first “diaconate.” While these seven served in more extensive roles, their appointment nonetheless prefigures what has become a common practice in the church over the centuries. The New Testament does present a clear, though general, description of this office in the church.

Qualifications for Leadership in the Local Church

Servant Leadership from Jesus

Jesus embodied and taught that the central aspect of leadership in the Christian community is servanthood. In John 13 Jesus exemplified the lesson by washing the feet of the disciples, concluding the object lesson with, “I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. Very truly I tell you, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him” (John 13:15–16).

On another occasion, Jesus denied a request from the mother of Zebedee’s sons that they be given special recognition in the Kingdom. The indignation among the other disciples at the request led Jesus to teach “whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Matthew 20:26–28).

Full of the Holy Spirit

As the Early Church faced the problem of distributing food equally, the apostles found seven men “known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom” to whom this challenge could be delegated (Acts 6:3). Leadership in the church is a spiritual calling, demanding the fullness of the Spirit for its successful realization. This fullness of the Spirit will be evident in the expression of leadership giftings by the Spirit for the ministry (see Romans 12; 1 Corinthians 12; Ephesians 4). The fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22–23) will also be abundantly growing in the leader who is full of the Holy Spirit.

Specific Lists of Qualifications

The apostle Paul provides specific qualifications for two leadership positions in the Church, elders/overseers and deacons. In 1 Timothy 3:1–7 and Titus 1:5–9 he gives a lengthy list of qualifications for elders/overseers. Volumes have been written explaining each of the specific aspects of these qualifications that Paul lists, so this paper will not engage each. It is very instructive, though, to observe the emphasis on the character and relational responsibilities of the elder/overseer. For instance, they should be “above reproach, faithful to his wife, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not given to drunkenness, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money” (1 Timothy 3:2–3). Faithfulness to the “faith” and the ability to communicate that to others are requirements, but Paul is concerned that the excellent character of the leader is evident and beyond question.

The other leadership position for which Paul gives a list of qualifications is the deacon (1 Timothy 3:8–13). The deacon, too, must exemplify the highest character, be deeply committed to the “faith,” be tested and experienced, and maintain a healthy family relationship. Paul is very concerned that the leadership of the church never be guilty of debilitating attacks on their character because they are to maintain themselves properly. The fullness of the Spirit, producing fruit and gifts, is crucial to achieving these goals.

Functions of Pastoral Leadership in the Local Church

The tasks of pastoral leadership in the local church are numerous and varied. This paper addresses three essential areas of pastoral ministry.

Ministry of the Word

The leadership of the Jerusalem church, faced with the need for ensuring that all widows received an equal distribution of food, enunciated their primary function, “the ministry of the word” (Acts 6:2). The work of equipping the saints for works of service (Ephesians 4:12) includes preaching and teaching the truths of the faith, so they become ingrained in the hearts and minds of the congregation. Sound preaching and teaching will serve to increase biblical and theological literacy in the congregation. The effort to prepare sermons and lessons involves the use of all the skills gained through study and diligent application to the task of interpreting the Word of God. When those efforts are bathed in prayer and anointed by the Holy Spirit, the people are prepared for the service to which they are called.

Pastoral Care

Using the image of the shepherd to compare to the functions of leadership in the local church emphasizes the need for pastoral care for the congregation (Acts 20:28–31; 1 Peter 5:2–3). Congregational members have issues and concerns that need spiritual help, which the leadership in the local church can provide. Counseling, prayer, encouragement, challenge, and correction when needed serve to strengthen the church as it grows into the image of Christ. The loving concern shown to believers as they pass through the difficulties of life can make all the difference in maintaining and having their faith strengthened. Leadership in the local church must include the pastoral care of the congregation.

Leading

A crucial function of leadership in the local church is determining the direction and goals of the congregation. This includes the vital task of administration, but even more importantly hearing from God His will for the church and communicating that clearly to the people. Administration assists the church in getting to the goal, but leading announces the goal. The analysis of the situation, potential, skills and resources available, community need, and strengths of the church are important, but paramount is hearing from God. Leadership needs to spend the time required in His presence to hear His heartbeat for the local assembly so they can declare that to the people.

Considerations for Leadership in the Local Church

Leadership in the local church faces numerous challenges and concerns, so there is little way they could all be addressed in this paper. However, these three will be considered: pastoral selection, women in leadership and ministry, and the ministry team.

Pastoral Selection

The conservation and continuation of ministry direction and goals in the local church are critical. Too often changes in leadership cause redirection and loss of momentum. For this reason, it is good for the local church to have a plan for the time when leadership changes. There are numerous models, each with its values. Leadership in the local church should carefully analyze their situation and potential, and decide on the plan that will carry the church forward into the ongoing will of God. It is best if this is considered long before there is a leadership change. To wait until then may be to wait too long.

Gaining congregational participation and agreement with the pastoral selection process is necessary. The use of search committees, congregational surveys/meetings, private and public interviews, and a determined effort for openness in the process can be beneficial. Another possible scenario, especially if the present pastor senses the will of

God for new pastoral leadership early, is to select the successor and allow a time of transition, leading up to the actual change.

Women in Leadership and Ministry

Leadership in the local church is open to all whom God calls without limitation based on gender. The Assemblies of God Bylaws, Article VII, Section 2, states that “divinely called and qualified women may also serve the church in the ministry of the Word,” and “are eligible to serve in all levels of church ministry, and/or district and General Council leadership.” The call of God is determinative of the right and privilege of service in the local church. He pours His Spirit out on all flesh, equipping each for ministry in His kingdom (Acts 2:17–18, quoting Joel 2:28–29). ²

Ministry Team

A ministry team of both volunteer and paid members, assigned to various ministries and groups in the congregation, joins the senior leadership of the local church in important ministry roles. The constitution and bylaws of the assembly determine the procedures for selection, hiring, and the lines of accountability. Most often, congregational need, ministry opportunity, or a challenge or concern defines the precise ministries to be carried out by members of the ministry team.

The ministry team is an essential component of the pastoral leadership of the local church. The team should be representative of the demography of the congregation, be diverse, and be fully committed to the goals of the senior leadership. They should be encouraged to seek ministerial credentials as appropriate to their roles. Ministry assignments should be clear, the ministry team should be honored as ministers among the congregation, and they should not be subject to dismissal merely because a change has taken place in the senior leadership.

Styles of Governance in the Local Church

Structure and organization in the first-century church were elementary and developmental. Apostolic leadership concerned itself with the organizational structure only as it was needed to sustain and support the work of the Spirit. It is in this observation that a fundamental principle of governance emerges. Structure and organization are never ends in themselves; they provide basic “systems” by which the life of the Spirit in the church can be supported and encouraged. In this, we see flexibility and adaptability. In other words, all matters of governance in the Early Church were consequential to the work of the Spirit rather than a divinely revealed template to be imposed on every new congregation.

New Testament Patterns

Consistent with Old Testament patterns, the Early Church continued to set apart those designated as elders (*presbyteros*). Elders are associated with James in the administration of the church in Jerusalem (Acts 11:30; 21:18). The role of elders is expressed more widely in the life of the church as seen in Acts 15:6, 23. The apostle Paul does not mention elders in his earlier epistles, possibly suggesting that “form” followed “function,” with the structure being put in place only as the need arose. However, Paul appointed elders in each of the churches that he founded (Acts 14:23). Appointments to leadership roles were singular in purpose: to support and sustain the work of the Holy Spirit in the life of the church. As was noted earlier, the terms “elder” (*presbyteros*) and “overseer/bishop” (*episkopos*) are used interchangeably in Acts 20:17, 28 and Titus 1:5–9, and probably express the ministerial role of the pastor.

Three Historical Models of Governance

Three basic models of church government have emerged in the history of the church: episcopal, presbyterian, and congregational. While none of the three is sustained in its purest form, each having some characteristics of the others, they are nonetheless distinguishable by specific traits. In the episcopal model, authority flows from the top,

and the lead ministers may be referred to as bishops, with presbyters and deacons serving in subordinate ways. In the presbyterian model, authority is vested in a group of elected leaders, often identified as ruling elders, who along with the teaching elder(s) oversee the governance of the local church. In the congregational model, the ultimate authority resides in the membership of the church. Again, each of the three models bears certain similarities to the others. All three have aspects of the others—oversight roles, committee functions, and congregational influence.

The Assemblies of God Historical Model

While new models of governance are emerging, the congregational model has, for the most part, held a place of prominence in the Assemblies of God. Consistent with this model, the congregation has the responsibility of providing oversight and direction for the church. It elects the lead pastor and the official board (referred to as deacons and/or trustees). While there are many variations to this model as described here, the essentials remain constant.

Issues impacting the church are brought before open meetings of the congregation for discussion and decision. The elected leadership roles are considered representatives of the entire congregation and subject to the local church. The constitution and bylaws of the assembly determine the lines and limits of authority both for the congregation and for the elected leadership.

Contemporary Models

Each new generation brings with it a renewed commitment to creativity, innovation, and inspiration. While these qualities are admirable and should be encouraged, they should be accompanied by certain safeguards and cautions. Typically, the pendulum swings widely and exposes the critical need for balance. For example, impatience with a congregational model of governance can invite a consolidation of leadership that may ultimately lack the balance that will assure strong continuity and vitality. Conversely, the

desire for strong congregational control can strip leadership of the flexibility it needs to govern effectively.

The following safeguards and cautions are given to promote the kind of healthy balance that will provide the best in the governance of the local church:

1. Any pursuit for control over the body of Christ that is not balanced with a spirit of true humility will thwart the progress of the local church. A spirit of unlimited power is a violation of servant leadership.
2. Leadership titles described in Scripture speak more to the function of ministry than to personal position. Titles are subservient and incidental to the work that emerges from an authentic call. That a minister may or may not be referred to as an “apostle” or “prophet” does not exclude the presence of “apostolic” and “prophetic” forms of ministry.
3. The church needs and must encourage an entrepreneurial and progressive attitude from leadership. However, those qualities must not be at the expense of the highest level of integrity.
4. The motivational energy for fruitful ministry is found in an unselfish and wholehearted commitment to the building of the kingdom of God. Territorialism and a spirit of jealousy will hinder and limit the effectiveness of ministry and will impede the work of God in its effort to reach its community. Recognition seeking is contrary to servant leadership.
5. Every minister needs the discipline of willing submission to the authorities that God has put in place. Sectional, district, and national leadership provide that much-needed presence of security and accountability.

Multisite Models

Some congregations are finding a way to extend their ministry by opening additional sites for people to gather for worship and discipleship. In these multisite models, and they do vary, governance and responsibility reside on the main campus. Often each site will have a “pastor” who is part of the central campus ministry team assigned to serve the specific location. He/She is accountable to the main campus and is responsible for pastoral care and direction at the designated site.

The worship service from the main campus often is video-linked to each site, so there is a shared worship experience and sermon-teaching. This model, which is increasingly popular, does allow for the extension of ministry and accountability at each site.

Eldership Models

Among the governance shifts is an “eldership model,” with a greater amount of authority vested in a group of elders, rather than solely in the congregation. The advantages of this model, or one of its many variations, is that it provides greater flexibility, encourages entrepreneurial leadership, and is said to be more consistent with an “apostolic” form of leadership.

Among the many variations of the “eldership” model will be found greater or lesser involvement of the congregation, specific definition of roles within the group of elders, and a wide variety of reporting and accountability systems. In this model of governance, there is a clear shift from congregational governance to designated or assigned governance.

Some advocates of the “eldership model” view it as more consistent with the patterns of leadership observable in the Early Church. They argue against a “democratic-electoral” approach to governance in favor of a more “apostolic” or “Spirit-directed” approach to governance. The evidence of the New Testament, however, shows both appointments and “election” to leadership in the church.

In Acts 14:23, Paul and Barnabas “appointed elders” in the churches they founded. The apostle Paul states that Titus was “chosen by the churches to accompany us” (2 Corinthians 8:19). The word used in both instances is *cheirotoneo*, which etymologically is translated “choose, elect by raising hands.” Such practice suggests a participatory approach to the selection of leadership. The Early Church practiced a variety of methods by which leaders were selected for ministry and service. This speaks to a kind of fluid and flexible approach to governance practices and models in the New Testament church. This observation becomes instructive when the church today is considering biblical patterns and forms relative to church governance.

Relationship of the Local Church to the Assemblies of God

The Constitution of the Assemblies of God, Article XI: Local Assemblies, identifies four kinds of local churches in their relationship to the Assemblies of God. The Constitution provides a detailed explanation of each; this paper summarizes that material.

General Council Affiliated Churches

General Council affiliated churches are given a Certificate of Affiliation from The General Council of the Assemblies of God based on their acceptance of the tenets of faith, their adoption of membership standards, having at least twenty members, being incorporated, having enough qualified members to fill leadership roles, and being able to make provisions for a pastor. The General Council affiliated church has the right of self-government and is subordinate to the General Council in matters of doctrine and polity.

District Council Affiliated Churches

District council affiliated churches are not yet able to meet the requirements for being General Council affiliated and are under the supervision of the district/network, according to the district/network's constitution and bylaws.

Parent Affiliated Churches

Parent affiliated churches are under the supervision of the parenting church, according to the constitution and bylaws of the parent church. The relationship between the parenting church and the parent affiliated church varies widely. They generally fit the multisite governance model mentioned above. Geographical boundaries do not limit parent affiliated churches.

Cooperating Assemblies

Cooperating assemblies are churches agreeing with the Assemblies of God's Statement of Fundamental Truths who enter into a cooperative status with a district/network.

These churches have not, but may, officially affiliate with the district/network when they meet the expectations of the district/network.

Relationship of the Local Church to the Government

The local church must be aware of and follow the laws governing nonprofit groups in their locale. Each local church should research the registration and reporting requirements of the local, state, and federal governments and implement processes to comply. The presentation of the local church should always evidence compassion and commitment to the needs of their community, which can be enhanced as the church is compliant with local regulations. Only in the extreme situation of a conflict with laws that would limit the clear enunciation of the gospel message should anything less be considered.

An essential aspect of compliance with legal expectations is incorporation. Some of the advantages of the church being incorporated are (1) the church is recognized by the state; (2) the church can own and transfer property in the name of the church; (3) members of the church are shielded from personal liability for acts of other members; (4) the church can enter into contracts or agreements as a corporation; and (5) the church has standing to sue and be sued.³ Specific requirements may vary from state to state, so checking with the local courthouse and state offices is advised. Incorporation will add another layer of local leadership to the church, that of the trustee. In most cases, members of the official board of the church can also be designated as trustees.⁴

Conclusion

The apostle Peter provides a helpful and challenging statement that summarizes the topic of leadership and governance in the Church. “Be shepherds of God’s flock that is under your care, watching over them—not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not pursuing dishonest gain, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock” (1 Peter 5:2–3).

The implications of this portrait are profound. Spiritual leadership, which is caring for the congregation as a shepherd cares for the sheep, is based on the willingness to serve. Sadly, some have sought to rule more than serve, to strive for title and prestige rather than to emulate the attributes of a servant. Servanthood should mark the attitude of the leader and determine the shape and implementation of the governing model for the local church.

Oversight is defined in terms of humility and service rather than appointment and recognition. It takes more to be a true leader than mere position and title. The governing model should emphasize, then, humility and service in its structure and contours. Willingness rather than constraint is the heart of authentic leadership. When constraint and control surface, Christ-honoring leadership is thwarted.

Greed has no place in the hearts of spiritual leaders. A spirit of covetousness violates in radical ways that to which Christ calls His servants. The desire for power and control, which can be evidenced in a governing structure, must not be the motivational force in leading the church. Being an example is the key to a quality of leadership that is effective and impactful.

Notes:

1. All biblical citations will be from the New International Version (NIV) (2011) unless otherwise noted.
2. For a more complete presentation of the position regarding women in leadership and ministry, see the Assemblies of God Position Paper, "The Role of Women in Ministry," <https://ag.org/Beliefs/Position-Papers/The-Role-of-Women-in-Ministry>.
3. John P. Joseph, "Church Incorporation: Right or Wrong?" <https://enrichmentjournal.ag.org/Issues/2010/Spring-2010/Church-Incorporation>.
4. For a more complete explanation of the relationship of the local church to the government, see Richard R. Hammar, *Pastor, Church & Law, Third Edition* (Matthews, NC: Christian Ministry Resources, 2000); Richard R. Hammar, *Church Governance: What Leaders Must Know to Conduct Legally Sound Church Business* (Carol Stream, IL: Christianity Today International, 2019); Richard R. Hammar, *2019 Church & Clergy Tax Guide* (Carol Stream, IL: Christianity Today, 2019).

POSITION PAPER ON MISUSE OF SPIRITUAL LEADERSHIP

(Adopted by the Assemblies of God General Presbytery in Session August 4-5, 2025)

Summary

Spiritual leaders are called to lead the spiritual development of Christians within community. Their common responsibility is to lead God's people to become more like Christ, to equip them to minister according to their gifts, and to unify them within community. Spiritual leaders fulfill their callings as they remain in God's will. This includes an ongoing recognition of the boundaries, responsibilities, and spiritual power that define their leadership. When spiritual leaders attempt to coerce and control rather than empower others, they misuse that authority, which leads to spiritual abuse.

The Assemblies of God condemns spiritually abusive behavior. The Fellowship was formed in recognition of the need for increased cooperation among Pentecostals to fulfill the Great Commission of Matthew 28:19–20. The proper use of spiritual authority is essential in fulfilling this command of Jesus. Spiritual abuse perverts our ability to make disciples.

Introduction

The Bible offers a variety of models for spiritual leadership. Spiritual leadership may be exercised by parents, grandparents, and similar adults within families. Judges, prophets, priests, and kings have assumed the role for nations. Scribes and royal advisors have served among refugees and exiles. A wide variety of leaders can serve a wide variety of communities, helping people experience spiritual growth.

Authority can be abused. Scriptural accounts, from judges like Samson (Judges 14–16) to kings like Saul (1 Samuel 13–15), show this. Spiritual leadership rests on spiritual authority and influence coming from faithful obedience to God's calling and representation of God's will to a community.

Leadership may be understood and judged through three components: motivation, methods, and results. A leader may be critiqued harshly on one component while being praised on another. However, all three components must work together within spiritual leadership. All spiritual leadership shares the same goal—healthy spiritual development of God's people, which can only be accomplished through spiritually healthy methods. A spiritual leader cannot achieve the best results without the right motivation. Regardless of proper methods, one's spiritual development shapes his or her methodology (Luke 6:45).

While this document emphasizes leadership as a responsibility given to individuals, it is important to recognize that spiritual leadership is often expressed through communal discernment, not solely positional assignment. In many cultures around the world, including among some indigenous peoples of North America, leadership is primarily relational, rooted in mutual trust, lived wisdom, and the recognition of spiritual gifting, rather than hierarchy or formal office. A biblical model of ministry is similar to this framework—valuing consensus, contextual knowledge, and shared discernment over command structures (Acts 15:28).

A community that aims for spiritual health needs healthy spiritual leadership. Spiritual leaders are responsible for living in a way that others would want to follow (Hebrews 13:7). Just as communities are responsible for holding leaders accountable, they are also responsible for remaining accountable to the leader's calling.

However, some community members may be uncomfortable even when spiritual leaders exercise their responsibility well. Often, this is due to being uncomfortable with accountability. Despite feelings of discomfort, leaders steward authority for the good of the community and by helping others recognize their God-given purpose. Conversely,

the abuse of this spiritual leadership can harm the community and is contrary to God's will.

Spiritual Leadership in the Bible

In the Old Testament, Moses stands out as a spiritual leader. He excelled in that role through faithfulness, obedience, and humility. Scripture described him as "more humble than anyone else on the face of the earth" (Numbers 12:3)¹. However, his leadership fell short of perfection. Because Moses did not honor God as holy before the people at Meribah Kadesh, he died before he could lead Israel into the Promised Land (Numbers 20:12; 27:14; Deuteronomy 32:51–52).

Under Moses, God raised a priesthood to care for Israel's worship (Exodus 28–31). He also raised Levites who supplied priests, singers and musicians, guards for the tabernacle, and workers who broke down, carried, and rebuilt the tabernacle as Israel moved (Numbers 1–8, 18). The tribe of Levi was responsible for teaching Israel how to treat God's presence (Leviticus 10:1–3) and could be punished for abusing their position (1 Samuel 2:27–36).

God continued to provide leadership after Moses, including Joshua, judges, and kings. These leaders required the gift of God's Spirit to assume leadership of Israel (Numbers 11:16–29; 27:18; Deuteronomy 34:9; Judges 3:10; 6:34; 11:29; 14:6; etc.). At times, God removed His Spirit from leaders who failed to submit to Him in their lives and leadership (Judges 16:20; 1 Samuel 15:23; 2 Samuel 12:7–13; Psalm 51:11).

From the Exodus through the exile, God called prophets to speak for Him to Israel (Exodus 4:11–12; 1 Samuel 3:10; Isaiah 6:8; Malachi 1:1; etc.). He empowered by the Spirit (2 Kings 2:15) men and women (Judges 4:4; 2 Kings 22:14) to speak His word to leaders (2 Samuel 12:1) and the people (Jeremiah 1:4–10).

As spokespeople for God, prophets faced harsh judgment if they failed. Some prophets failed by disobeying God's orders (Numbers 22; 31:8; 1 Kings 13:6–32). Others failed

by wrongly taking payment as if for services rendered (2 Kings 5:26–27). And many failed by falsely prophesying in the Lord's name (1 Kings 22:24–25; Jeremiah 28:15–16). Even when prophets proved faithful to God, some faced condemnation by the king or the people who rejected God's word (Luke 13:33). Prophets could suffer because of their obedience and endure rejection by people unfaithful to God (1 Samuel 8:7).

Spiritual leaders guided families, tribes, and the nation to act as one faithful people of God (Joshua 24:15). Leaders failed by not trusting God (Numbers 20:12; 2 Samuel 24), rejecting limits to their authority (1 Samuel 13:7–13; 2 Chronicles 26:16), using their position to take advantage of God's people (1 Samuel 2:12–17; 2 Samuel 11; 1 Kings 21:1–16), and leading Israel astray from God's will (1 Kings 12:26–33; 16:30–33; Ezekiel 13). Some leaders failed so consistently that God removed them from power entirely. That happened to priests (1 Samuel 2:12–25), kings (1 Samuel 15:10–11, 23), and prophets (1 Kings 22:24–25).

Yet, the Old Testament prophets spoke of something better. They described a righteous leader to come who would be identified by the presence of God's Spirit (Isaiah 11:1–5). Spiritual leadership in the New Testament centers on Christ. Jesus embodied God's answer for the restoration of the world (2 Corinthians 5:19). After His death and resurrection, He sits upon God's throne (Revelation 5:6) and serves as Head of the church (Colossians 1:18).

Jesus chose apostles to serve as His representatives (John 20:21–23). After His ascension, He sent the Spirit to empower the church (Acts 2:33). Besides apostles, Christ gave the church prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers. Together, they equip believers for ministry until the church reaches unity in the faith and matures into the image of Christ (Ephesians 4:11–13).

The apostles chose people to oversee the ministries of the church (Acts 6:6) and to lead in their absence (1 Timothy 3:1–12). These leaders were expected to lead as those who remain accountable to God (Hebrews 13:17). The early church regarded elders as spiritual leaders of the community along with the apostles (Acts 14:23; 15:6). Paul

appointed elders in the churches he planted. He also gave qualifications for deacons and those who oversaw the resources of the church (1 Timothy 3:1–13). Yet, Paul expected everyone to use spiritual gifts in a way that uplifted the community (1 Corinthians 12–14).

A New Testament understanding of spiritual leadership is deeply connected to the image of the church as the fully-gifted body of Christ. Spiritual leaders are members of that body whose authority flows from the exclusive Head of the church. As all members unify under Christ, the church works in harmony to fulfill His purposes (1 Corinthians 12:12–27; Ephesians 4:11–16).

In the Assemblies of God, leadership functions within a voluntary cooperative fellowship, not a hierarchical system of spiritual ranking. Every credentialed minister shares a common trust before God. Elected offices, such as presbyter or superintendent, are administrative roles over specific areas. Those in such offices should be relationally or contextually engaged in the communities they are entrusted to walk with and steward in partnership.

Pastoral Nature of Spiritual Leadership

A variety of New Testament leaders are seen as spiritual leaders (Ephesians 4:11–12; 1 Timothy 3:1–13). Pastors, also identified as “overseers” in 1 Timothy 3:1, are the church’s most recognized spiritual leaders today. However, others might occupy positions of spiritual authority, acting as a shepherd over the spiritual care of other believers without the title of pastor.

The English word pastor comes from the Latin word for shepherd. “Shepherd” became a commonly used image for spiritual leadership in Scripture. In Ezekiel 34, God called out Israel’s leaders as failed shepherds. They cared for themselves while ignoring the needs of the flock. The leaders also harshly mistreated the flock and did not search for them when they scattered. They abandoned their responsibilities and their people. In

contrast, God promised to be a good shepherd to Israel. He searches for missing sheep, heals the injured, and meets the needs of the entire flock (Ezekiel 34:1–16).

Using the same analogy, Jesus contrasted His leadership with the spiritual leaders of Israel in John 10. Leaders act like hired hands when they abandon the sheep to danger. Jesus finds, leads, protects, and provides for the sheep as the “Good Shepherd.” He sacrificed His life to fulfill that role (John 10:1–15).

The willingness to serve others sacrificially lies at the heart of all Christian leadership. Jesus demonstrated sacrificial service by willingly going to the cross and refusing to use His power to usurp the will of the Father (John 5:19; Philippians 2:6–8). Shepherds who are willing to lay down their lives for the flock follow Jesus’ example. They also follow Christ through not exerting power to dominate the flock. Pastoral leadership remains an exercise in submission (Ephesians 5:21).

The apostles warned church leaders to lead sacrificially and submissively. Paul, in writing to Timothy and Titus, gave guidance for leaders. He told them to choose elders or overseers who are gentle, have self-control, do not lose their temper, are not quarrelsome, do not love money, and are not conceited (1 Timothy 3:2–7; Titus 1:7–8). Peter called elders to shepherd communities freely and not begrudgingly. They must commit to serving, not be self-serving, and not “lord” their authority over others (1 Peter 5:3).

The Greek word for lord used here by Peter is the same word used by Jesus in Matthew 20:25 and Mark 10:42. Along with Luke 22:24, these passages describe disciples fighting over their position. Jesus warned them not to lead like “the Gentiles,” who see leadership as a way to lord over others. Instead, a Christlike leader serves and willingly gives his or her life. Jesus gave the model for spiritual leadership. He “did not come to be served, but to serve, and give his life as a ransom for many” (Matthew 20:28; Mark 10:45).

Spiritual leadership cannot be self-serving or oppressive. Shepherds who care more about their benefit than their flock are bad shepherds. Pastors who cannot govern their tempers and do not reflect gentleness or kindness are not good shepherds because they do not exhibit the fruit of the Spirit, which marks spiritual growth (Galatians 5:22–23).

The breadth of pastoral leadership should never exceed the depth of a minister's spiritual formation (1 Timothy 3:6). Jesus left an example of being prepared for ministry. He did not begin public ministry until after winning the battle over Satan in the wilderness (Matthew 4:1–11). A pastor's character must be strong enough to bear the weight of his or her influence.

Abuse of Spiritual Leadership

While examples are found throughout church history, the church in recent decades has openly named spiritual abuse as a problem. Definitions vary for spiritual abuse. Some focus on abuse at the hands of spiritual leaders. Others include abuse faced by leaders from those they lead². Most definitions include the use of authority (a position, a community, Scripture, etc.) to control an individual. Spiritual abuse (1) occurs in a spiritual context, (2) is motivated by a desire to lord one's "authority" over others, (3) is marked by persistent behavior, and (4) causes real harm whether intended or not.

Not every action that influences others in a spiritual context is abusive. Proper use of spiritual authority leads to enrichment rather than abuse, though the experience of that authority may be uncomfortable. Christian communities need spiritual authorities to encourage, confront, teach, correct, edify, and rebuke (2 Timothy 3:16 to 4:2)³. The apostle Paul gave a wonderful example of a leader able to rebuke lovingly through his letters (Romans 2; 1 Corinthians 1; 2 Corinthians 11; Galatians 1). A spiritual leader who corrects in love is following God's call.

Healing and maturity result from a proper use of spiritual leadership. Spiritually abusive leadership, however, negatively impacts the process of discipleship for the abused. A

spiritual injury usually will not heal through the ministry of leaders who created the wound.

People who have experienced spiritual abuse may face increased bouts of fear, anger, shame, depression, and the potential need for therapy. They can become isolated from others due to an inability to trust in community. Their ongoing spiritual struggles can include doubts about their self-worth, the safety of the church, and the goodness of God.

Patterns of controlling behavior often reveal spiritual abuse.⁴ Abuse becomes spiritual when it occurs within a spiritual environment and uses spiritual means to assert control. It is abusive because of the harm received as a result of controlling behavior. Spiritual abuse does not develop disciples. It unravels the work done in those who could have become healthy disciples otherwise.⁵

Controlling behavior can take many forms. Inappropriate appeals to God's authority (using Scripture, personal prophecy, etc., to control) offer one form. It can take the form of insincere public praise or shame (e.g., making an example of someone as a form of manipulation). Controlling behavior also uses intimidation tactics to create the fear of being removed from the leader's favor or isolated from one's peers. Excessive accountability practices also control (e.g., overprogramming so people cannot choose how to spend their time).⁶

Another form of spiritual abuse arises when leaders, elevated by election or appointment, assume that their office automatically qualifies them to "lord" their authority (Matthew 20:25) in unfamiliar ministry settings. This is particularly damaging in contextualized ministries where credibility is built on relationships, cultural fluency, and spiritual recognition by the community. Positional power must always be tempered by communal humility and the awareness that the Holy Spirit often speaks through the unexpected or overlooked.

Harmful mistakes in ministry may reflect immaturity or incompetence rather than being signs of spiritual abuse. Even spiritually and professionally mature leaders can fail. However, when a pattern forms through repeated mistakes, it may reveal an abusive leader.

Abusive leaders may all seek control, but not all share the same motives. Predators use their positions of influence to feast on the flock, motivated by appetites. Such leaders depend on secrecy for survival. Predators need others to fail to recognize their patterns of behavior. They distance themselves from those who might discover their activity or nature. This kind of spiritual abuser causes unmistakable harm.

Narcissists control to feed their egos. These leaders exert control in various ways. They give responsibility without power. Some withdraw praise to keep people motivated by their attention. Others make it difficult to question or talk about their decisions. They build a structure centered on themselves that prioritizes personal loyalty over biblical faithfulness.⁷

Some leaders, who are neither predators nor narcissists, are just insecure. Insecurity leads them to engage in controlling behaviors to protect their authority. Insecure leaders may surround themselves with people they see as weaker than themselves in charisma, talent, or other ways. They feel threatened by the ministry gifts of others. Insecure leaders discourage those who grow beyond their comfort level.

All forms of controlling leadership can be dictatorial. Regardless of motivation, many dictatorial leaders share the need to build structures with themselves at the center. Loyalty to their authority carries more weight than faithfulness to God's will.

However, some dictatorial leaders are neither predators, narcissists, nor personally insecure. Controlling or dominating other believers may not be a leader's primary motivation. Instead, some lead through control as the only way they know how to exercise leadership. Some leaders do not recognize the difference spiritual leadership

makes in managing an organization, and they treat the individuals they are called to disciple as little more than tools they are trying to use for the good of the organization.

Even still, a pure motivation does not justify using spiritually abusive methods of control. Controlling methods will lead to harm. Even if well-intentioned, these leaders fail to build up the body of Christ well. They must learn to share power with others whom God has also called.

The Assemblies of God urges ministers to put accountability structures into place. Yet, those processes can fail for a variety of reasons. People who dismiss patterns of abusive behavior as isolated incidents can cause failure. Leaders nullify accountability when they dismiss those who claim abuse or blame them for being hurt. Processes break down when more concern is shown for how the complaint was given than for the complaint itself. And failure is close when solutions focus on forgiveness without change or reconciliation without repentance.⁸

A healthy Christian community puts structures in place to build up everyone. They prioritize transparency from leaders through the right processes and practices. Communities should choose leaders based on their character rather than just competency. They share the ministry responsibilities that belong to the body of Christ. Leaders must remain accountable to the greater community for decisions and behaviors.

To prevent spiritual abuse from occurring or continuing, every Christian community should be taught the following:

1. Spiritual leadership empowers rather than dominates. Spiritual growth is an indicator of a healthy spiritual community. A community that expects to grow spiritually will be more sensitive to spiritually abusive practices that interfere with that.
2. Accountability belongs to the whole church. The ministry of the church and the treatment of its members remain the responsibility of the community, including the leaders who oversee and equip it.

3. Exercise awareness of the signs and dangers of spiritual abuse. No leader should be solely responsible for preventing spiritual abuse. The whole community shares this responsibility of awareness.⁹
4. The community is also responsible for the care of those who have previously been hurt by spiritual abuse. One of the greatest dangers of spiritual abuse is the distance it can create between believers and their community. Communities must become places of healing and wholeness for those who are wounded.

Conclusion

The Assemblies of God was founded as a cooperative fellowship that honors the calling and gifting of all Spirit-filled believers, not as a clerical hierarchy. As we seek to cultivate healthy spiritual leadership, we must resist any drift toward positional superiority and instead affirm diverse models of leadership found throughout the global church. To walk in step with the Spirit, we must honor the voices of those God has raised up from within, not just those with titles. The nature of spiritual leadership listens, learns, and leads in discernment within community.

The spiritual development of Christian communities requires spiritual leadership. Spiritual leadership is marked by a willingness to sacrifice, serve, and put others first for their good and the glory of God. Spiritual leaders who care for and empower those under their charge do an incredible service for God's people. Their work should be honored (1 Thessalonians 5:12–13; 1 Timothy 5:17).

Conversely, abusing the position and influence of spiritual leadership does great harm to the gospel, the reputation of the church, and to individual believers. Spiritual leadership empowers and edifies believers; it does not coerce and control in the self-interest of the leader. Spiritual leadership flows from the authority and heart of Christ.

Notes:

1. All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV®. Copyright ©1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.® Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. zondervan.com.

The “NIV” and “New International Version” are trademarks registered in the United States Patent and Trademark Office by Biblica, Inc.®

2. One of the earliest definitions is also one of the simplest; spiritual abuse is “controlling behavior linked to spiritual beliefs.” Lisa Oakley and Justin Humphreys, *Escaping the Maze of Spiritual Abuse* (SPCK Publishing, 2019), 20.
3. Michael J. Kruger, *Bully Pulpit: Confronting the Problem of Spiritual Abuse in the Church* (Zondervan, 2022), 35–39.
4. Elements that continue to show up in varied definitions of spiritual abuse are controlling behavior, spiritual environment, and psychological harm. For example, Oakley and Humphreys define it in *Escaping the Maze of Spiritual Abuse* as “a form of emotional and psychological abuse. It is characterized by a systematic pattern of coercive and controlling behavior in a religious context. Spiritual abuse can have a deeply damaging impact on those who experience it.” 30–31.
5. For a deeper examination of the effect of spiritual abuse, see Kruger, 99–109; David Johnson and Jeff Van Vonderen, *The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse: Recognizing and Escaping Spiritual Manipulation and False Spiritual Authority* (Bethany House Publishers, 2005), 41–51; Oakley and Humphreys, 85–86.
6. Johnson and Van Vonderen, 53–93; Kruger, 24–33; and Oakley and Humphreys, 64.
7. To better understand how narcissistic behaviors and types also exist on a spectrum, see Chuck DeGroat, *When Narcissism Comes to Church: Healing Your Community from Emotional and Spiritual Abuse* (InterVarsity Press, 2019), 25–43.
8. Kruger, 59–97.
9. Oakley and Humphreys, 134–135 argue for a preventative approach to spiritual abuse under the acronym ESSTA: Empowerment of all believers, Supervision of leaders, Support of the abused, Training for ministry teams, and Awareness of spiritual abuse.

POSITION PAPER ON MODERN-DAY APOSTLES

(Adopted by the General Presbytery in session August 4-5, 2025)

Summary

The apostles appointed by Christ in the New Testament fulfilled a unique and foundational role as representative authorities in the Church. Through their work, the Church was established as a Spirit-filled community of believers empowered to worship God, serve others, and bear witness to Jesus.

For over one hundred years, the Assemblies of God has consistently responded that the church maintains an apostolic function without needing formal apostolic offices or titles. The whole church functions apostolically when it works together to advance the gospel and the kingdom of God under the power of the Holy Spirit. This shared ministry includes the work of missionaries and church planters, who spearhead the spread of the gospel and the church wherever it is needed.

Biblical Apostleship

Confusion and controversy surround the term *apostle* today. The Greek word for apostle, *apostolos*, means one sent out for a specific purpose or mission. The conceptual meaning of the apostle's role derives from the Old Testament, where ambassadors, delegates, and emissaries regularly served to represent a higher authority.

Interpreters typically understand *apostolos* in light of the Hebrew word *shaliach* ("one who is sent"), which was used to describe representatives within Judaism. The Mishnah states, "A man's *shaliach* is like himself" (M. Berakhot 5.5). This meant that if someone's agent or representative made a deal, it was the same as if the person being

represented made the deal (similar to the modern concept of power of attorney). The Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Old Testament) uses *apostolos* to translate the Hebrew word *shaliach* in 1 Kings 14:6.

God sent Jesus to be the representative or apostle of God (John 20:21; Hebrews 3:1). Jesus appointed the Twelve (Mark 3:14–15; Luke 6:12–16), mirroring the twelve tribes as a sign of the restoration of Israel. Along with the seventy (a number signifying the seventy elders of Israel under Moses), Jesus sent them out to preach the good news with specific authority for particular purposes (cf. Matthew 10:1, 5–16; Mark 6:7–11; Luke 9:1–5). The twelve apostles witnessed Jesus' life and resurrection and were personally commissioned by Jesus to serve as representatives (John 20:21). They are often called "the apostles of Christ." Paul also identified himself as an apostle of Christ (2 Corinthians 1:1) and connected his apostleship to his witness of the Risen Lord (1 Corinthians 15:8–9). According to Paul, all the apostles saw the Risen Lord (1 Corinthians 15:7).

Paul counted apostles as one of the gifts that Jesus gave to the Church, along with prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers in Ephesians 4:11–13. These gifted leaders, taken together, benefited the local church by providing the functions needed to equip, edify, and unify the church. Evaluation of ministry effectiveness was implicitly based on how they contributed to the church's unity, ministry, and maturity and how well they worked together with the other ministry gifts of Christ in that contribution.

Apostolic functions in the New Testament included dispatch by Jesus to share the gospel and plant the church. New Testament apostles operated in signs and wonders as part of their witness to the gospel (Romans 15:19; 2 Corinthians 12:12; Hebrews 2:4). Due to the difficulty of delivering the gospel to unreached places and people, logistically and spiritually, apostles experienced suffering. Their ability to endure hardship without failing in their witness may also have signified apostleship (2 Corinthians 4:7–11; 12:10). As representatives of Jesus, apostolic workers humbly served and did not abuse their calling, understanding that God has delegated the

authority granted to them. Apostles also remained accountable to the church, particularly elders (Acts 15:2).

The Bible provides the names of other appointed apostles, though the term encompassed a generic sense of dispatching representatives on an official mission on behalf of the senders. Some may be distinguished as apostles sent by the church rather than apostles personally appointed by the Risen Lord. Apollos (1 Corinthians 4:6–13), Epaphroditus (Philippians 2:25), Barnabas (Acts 14:14; 1 Corinthians 9:5–6), Andronicus (Romans 16:7), Junia (Romans 16:7), and another unnamed brother with Titus (2 Corinthians 8:22–23) are also counted as apostles.

The apostles personally appointed by the Risen Lord possessed a unique spiritual authority. They passed on the stories and teachings of Jesus that formed the bedrock for church doctrine. The Early Church was formed around their teaching and witness, confirmed by the “wonders and signs”¹ they did (Acts 2:42–43). In dealing with the practical problems of the churches, including the application of their teaching, the apostles often shared leadership with others. For example, “the Twelve” apostles called upon the church of Jerusalem to select the “seven” deacons (Acts 6:2–3). When the Jerusalem Council resolved the schismatic debate over whether the Gentiles should keep the Jewish law, the issue was decided by “the apostles and elders” (Acts 15:4, 6, 22).

In the Jerusalem church, the apostles exercised sole authority early on (Acts 2:42; 4:37), but perhaps because of persecution and travel, they appear less prominently over time. Peter reported the conversion of Cornelius and his household to the “apostles and the believers” (11:1). The “apostles and elders” made up the Jerusalem Council (15:6). When Paul returned to Jerusalem after his third journey, he called on “James, and all the elders” (21:18). Elders exercised authority in Jerusalem, as seen in Acts, and elsewhere as seen in the New Testament letters.

The Council of Jerusalem in Acts 15 is the last reference to apostles in the Book of Acts and does not depict any individual apostle being in control. Rather, “Equality,

collegiality, and mutual submission under the leadership of the Holy Spirit appear to have ruled among the brethren during their deliberations and their hearing of the report by Barnabas and Paul ‘about the miraculous signs and wonders God had done among the Gentiles through them’ (15:12). After these deliberations at Jerusalem, Luke does not again mention the apostles, their work, or their persons.”²

The opening chapter of Acts reflects a concern to maintain the number of the twelve apostles. Peter looked to the Scriptures and determined that the vacancy created by Judas’s defection and death should be filled. The way the vacancy was filled is highly instructive regarding qualifications. Jesus had personally appeared and given “instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen” (Acts 1:2). Two qualifying issues stand out: (1) personal commissioning by the Lord, and (2) thorough familiarity with the teachings of Jesus.

No biblical evidence exists that the church ever sought a successor to one of the Twelve after their deaths. For example, the Early Church did not attempt to replace James, son of Zebedee, who was executed by Herod (Acts 12:2). Apart from the criteria set for selecting Matthias (Acts 1:21–26) and the criteria implied in the actions of Jesus and the account of Paul (1 Corinthians 15:3–11), no directions for making such an appointment exist. By contrast, Scripture offers clear qualifications and instructions for appointing elders/overseers and deacons (1 Timothy 3:1–13; Titus 1:5–9) for church authority.

In summary, those apostles personally appointed by Jesus shared a unique authority as representatives of Jesus who could personally testify to the resurrection of Jesus. Their teachings became the basis for Christian doctrine, and the writings that preserve those teachings became the New Testament. The church they established functions apostolically today as it preserves their teaching, furthers the gospel with signs and wonders, and suffers for the sake of the gospel. No Christian leader since those apostles, regardless of title, carries their unique authority.

The Question of Apostolic Restoration

In the Early Church, apostles were not replaced by the appointment of new apostles. Instead, the apostles appointed bishops. By the second century, the Early Church understood bishops as the apostles' successors. Church leaders such as Irenaeus claimed that the proper succession of bishops guaranteed the truth of apostolic doctrine.

The apostles appointed bishops, who in turn appointed bishops, and so on, to the present day. In other words, if you wanted to find a successor to the apostles for that day, you would need only to look for the bishops. They also canonized the New Testament as the teaching of apostles and apostolic associates written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

Apostolic succession was meant to guarantee the church's doctrine, but church tradition moved beyond Scripture over time. The Protestant reformers, recognizing the difference between tradition and the Bible, rejected the need for an apostolic succession of bishops. Apostolicity was found in the preaching of God's Word.

Protestants did not look to restore the apostolic office or recognize leaders, such as Luther and Calvin, as new apostles because it was enough to have the teachings of the apostles in Scripture. At most, they regarded those who spread the gospel into new areas as the closest contemporary equivalent to biblical apostleship, though without the same authority.

The early Pentecostal Movement saw itself as an apostolic movement. Many early Pentecostals first identified their movement as the "Apostolic Faith Movement." They believed that the restoration of Spirit baptism and spiritual gifts finished the work of the Protestant Reformation in restoring all that the apostles had taught and practiced. Yet Pentecostals, including the Assemblies of God, did not appoint "apostles" as a formal office.

Pentecostals were wary of giving any individual a title that placed that person above the church or in a role that did not have expressed accountability back to the church. Instead, the Assemblies of God used terms like “superintendent,” considering our understanding of episkopos (1 Timothy 3:1) as a church-appointed position.

Eventually, some within the Pentecostal Movement felt that the movement suffered from the absence of recognized apostles. From the middle of the twentieth century to the present, independent Pentecostal and charismatic churches sought to build new connections through a shared recognition of apostles within their midst. Toward the end of the twentieth century, leaders within these communities were connected through the teaching of C. Peter Wagner. He proposed a theology for restoring the formal office of apostles, which united those leaders under a common ecclesiology without necessitating more formal organization.

Many of these present-day apostles have exercised significant influence in charismatic circles through books, conferences, worship ministries, etc. Those leaders have also impacted some within the Assemblies of God who have benefited from their ministry. This impact raises the need to answer questions again about restoring the office of apostles.

A Consistent Answer to the Question of Apostolic Restoration

Throughout its history, the Assemblies of God has faced questions about restoring the formal office of apostles today. The first general superintendent, E. N. Bell, argued that “Jesus chose twelve and the Scriptures give these twelve the official name of the apostles, and not every one sent is an apostle in the same sense they were. In that special sense I do not believe there are any living apostles today.”³

At the same time, the Assemblies of God recognized the partial existence of apostolic ministry regarding spreading the gospel and planting or revitalizing the church. Donald Gee answered the question, “Are There Apostles Today?” Gee wrote, “In one sense the answer must be in the negative.... there no longer remains any foundation to be laid, in

the sense in which it was being finally completed by the first apostles.” Yet he also recognized that ministers can fulfill certain apostolic functions in missions, evangelism, and revivalism. In that regard, the Assemblies of God does believe that some ministers are “today fulfilling in a precious measure the same type of God-given ministry. Let no one deny them the recognition which is their due because they neither call themselves, nor are called by others, ‘apostles.’ Like every other ministry-gift of Christ, the office consists not in name, but in power.”

Shortly after World War II, the new “Latter Rain Movement” threatened to split the Assemblies of God over the issue of restoring a formal office of modern-day apostles, among others. The Assemblies of God passed Resolution 7 in response. It stated, “We disapprove of those extreme teachings and practices which, being unfounded Scripturally, serve only to break fellowship of like minded faith... to wit... The erroneous teaching that the Church is built on the foundation of present-day apostles and prophets.”⁵

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the Assemblies of God again faced the question of recognizing a formal office of modern-day apostles. They explained that since the New Testament does not provide guidance for the appointment of future apostles, such contemporary offices are deemed unnecessary to the health and growth of the church or to maintain its apostolic nature.

For over one hundred years, the Assemblies of God has consistently responded that the church maintains an apostolic function without needing apostolic offices or titles. At the same time, they have recognized that missions and church planting are more uniquely representative of the apostolic function of the church.

Christ promised the apostles that they would bear witness to Jesus throughout the world when the Spirit came upon them (Acts 1:8). According to the Assemblies of God Constitution Article V, item 10. “The Church and Its Mission,” in the Statement of Fundamental Truths, “The Assemblies of God exists expressly to give continuing

emphasis to this reason for being in the New Testament apostolic pattern by teaching and encouraging believers to be baptized in the Holy Spirit.”

A Spirit-filled church that operates in the power of the Spirit to bear witness to Christ to the “ends of the earth” is an apostolic church. Apostolic churches are founded on the scriptural testimony of the apostles and apostolic associates. They further the gospel, the Church, and the kingdom of God through their preparation and support of missionaries and church planters who plant faith communities in fresh ground. Their apostolic gifting is especially evident through the use of signs and wonders as churches are planted and by their ability to endure suffering for the sake of the gospel.

Guidelines

1. The apostolic nature of the church is guaranteed by adherence to Scripture, faithfully transmitted by the apostles of Jesus Christ in their foundational roles, and vital participation in the life and ministry of the Holy Spirit, who baptized, gifted, and led the first apostles to spread the gospel to all the world.
2. The function of apostles occurs wherever the Church of Jesus Christ is established among the unevangelized. It is neither uncommon nor inappropriate to recognize church planters and missionaries operating in apostolic capacities, particularly through signs and wonders. As Pentecostals, we fervently desire a generation of men and women who function apostolically: to take the gospel with signs following to people at home and abroad who have not yet heard or understood that “God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16).
3. Some churches outside the Assemblies of God may, in good faith and careful biblical definition, choose to name certain leaders apostles. Recognizing that the word apostle is used in different ways in the New Testament, we do not recognize the authority of modern-day apostles as equal to that of the apostles personally appointed by Jesus, including Paul. Contemporary apostles, for example, do not have the authority to add new teachings to the canon of Scripture or the Christian faith. However, in line with biblical apostleship, they may exercise empowerment to plant the Church and spread the gospel with signs and wonders, endure suffering faithfully as an example of Christ, and provide godly leadership in cooperation with other leaders so that the Church is equipped for ministry, mature in faith, and unified in the Spirit.
4. Within the Assemblies of God, persons are not recognized by the title of apostles. It is possible that individuals may attach that title to themselves to assert dominance and control over believers while leaving themselves unaccountable to the members in their care or the spiritual eldership of their fellowship (2 Corinthians 11:12–14). We look with grave concern at those who do

not work toward the maturity of a local church body that governs itself under the authority of the Holy Spirit and the guidelines of Scripture. Such leaders prefer more authoritarian structures where their words or decrees are unchallenged. The church must never forget that leadership gifts should not exalt leaders; they are meant to equip all of God's people for ministry.

5. We encourage our churches to heed the following provision of the General Council Bylaws: "Pastors and leaders of assemblies should make proper investigation of persons who seek to gain entrance to teach, minister, or pastor. Use of the platform should be denied until spiritual integrity and reliability have been determined" (Article VI, Section 3).

Notes

1. All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV®. Copyright ©1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.® Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. www.zondervan.com.
2. J. A. Hewett, "Apostles," in *New International Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements* (Zondervan, 2002), 881.
3. Donald Gee, *The Ministry-Gifts of Christ* (Gospel Publishing House, 1930), 34–37.
4. 1949 General Council Minutes, 26.

NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION® AND NIV® ARE REGISTERED TRADEMARKS OF BIBLICA, INC. USE OF EITHER TRADEMARK FOR THE OFFERING OF GOODS OR SERVICES REQUIRES THE PRIOR WRITTEN CONSENT OF BIBLICA US, INC.

POSITION PAPER ON MODERN-DAY PROPHECY

(Adopted by the General Presbytery in session August 4-5, 2025)

Summary

From the beginning of the Assemblies of God, prophecy has been affirmed as a spiritual gift for the Church today. Since the Day of Pentecost, the Church has functioned as a prophetic community. Any Spirit-filled believer may prophesy while discernment and judgment of prophecy belong to the full body of Christ.

Introduction

The phenomenal growth of the Pentecostal Movement within the twentieth century and the subsequent rise of the charismatic movement led many Christian traditions to accept the ministry of the laity through spiritual gifts and the use of signs and wonders in evangelism. Much of the evangelical world, in particular, has turned from cessationism, the belief that spiritual gifts ceased with the writing of the New Testament, to an understanding that New Testament gifts of the Holy Spirit are vital for the mission of the Church.

The Assemblies of God seeks to maintain the proper balance of encouraging prophecy as a spiritual gift while correcting abuse. Because a prophet claims to speak for God, few gifts can cause more damage when misused. The abuse of prophecy, however, does not invalidate the gift of prophecy. The Church needs to recognize and respond to the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit through the gift of prophecy given to the Church today.

Biblical Prophecy

Prophets have a unique responsibility to declare the words of God. In the Old Testament, that responsibility carried a unique authority because the community did not have the same Spirit of revelation as the prophets (Numbers 11:25–29). Furthermore, the community could not always easily discern between true and false prophets.

The Old Testament provides a few assessments for testing prophecy. Moses told the people that any prophet who speaks in the name of another god is false (Deuteronomy 18:20). When a prophet speaks in the name of the Lord, what they prophesied must come true. Otherwise, “that is a message the LORD has not spoken. That prophet has spoken presumptuously” (Deuteronomy 18:21–22).¹

How do we determine the true prophet if prophets speak in the name of the Lord but offer conflicting messages (1 Kings 22:23–24)? Jeremiah offered this advice in his encounter with the false prophet Hananiah (Jeremiah 28:5–9). The recipient should assume the message of judgment is true over a competing message of good tidings until the good things promised come to pass. In other words, a message Israel does not want to hear is more likely to be a true prophecy than a message Israel wants to hear. True prophets sometimes offer good news (2 Kings 14:25), but false prophets only offer what they think will win favor with others (Lamentations 2:14; Micah 3:5).

On the Day of Pentecost, the entire Church received the spirit of prophecy and spoke by the Holy Spirit in other languages (Acts 2:4). Peter also addressed the crowd in their shared language (Acts 2:14). At the same time, some followers of Jesus were recognized as prophets in the Book of Acts, including the prophets at Antioch (Acts 13:1); Judas and Silas, who traveled with Paul (Acts 15:32); the four daughters of Philip the Evangelist (Acts 21:8–9); and Agabus (Acts 11:28; 21:10–14).

The apostle Paul accepted prophecies from individual believers throughout Acts. When Agabus prophesied a coming famine to the Roman world, Barnabas and Paul raised a collection from Antioch to care for the churches in Judea (Acts 11:28–30). The prophets

at Antioch served as the likely source of the Holy Spirit's directive to separate Barnabas and Paul for apostolic ministry (Acts 13:1–2). When Agabus traveled from Judea to Caesarea and prophesied Paul's coming arrest in Jerusalem (Acts 21:10–13), Paul regarded it as confirmation of what he was already determined to face rather than a directive not to go. Paul offered one example of judging prophecy.

Paul's letters refer to the presence of prophets in the churches. To the Corinthians, Paul recognized the activity of female prophets (1 Corinthians 11:5–6), encouraged prophecy in worship gatherings (1 Corinthians 14:1–5), and instructed that prophecies were to be tested by apostolic teaching (1 Corinthians 14:37–38). He called on the Romans to exercise the gift of prophecy "in accordance" to their faith (Romans 12:6). Paul cautioned the Thessalonians not to "treat prophecies with contempt" (1 Thessalonians 5:20). Paul spoke of prophets, along with apostles, as foundational to the Church (Ephesians 2:20) and, along with apostles, evangelists, pastors, and teachers, as gifts that Christ has given to the Church (Ephesians 4:11). To Timothy, Paul noted a prophetic message had accompanied the laying on of hands by the elders (1 Timothy 4:14).

A prophetic word acknowledging the Incarnate Lord also serves as proof of Spirit-inspired speech. Jesus promised that the Holy Spirit would glorify Him (John 16:14). According to Paul, no one who is speaking by God's Spirit will curse Jesus, nor can anyone declare the lordship of Jesus except by the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:3). John wrote us that any spirit which acknowledges Jesus has come in the flesh is from God while any spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is the spirit of the antichrist (1 John 4:2–3).

These accounts make clear (1) the recognition of prophets in the early churches, (2) the recognition of both men and women as prophets, (3) that prophets traveled on occasion, and (4) the validation of prophetic authenticity through inspired utterance that was true to the Scriptures, apostolic teaching, and the revelation of Jesus.

The Gift of Prophecy

The key biblical teaching regarding the gift of prophecy is found in 1 Corinthians 12–14. Paul wrote that all believers may prophesy (1 Corinthians 14:31). He also made it clear that not every believer will be a prophet or be regularly used by the Spirit in that way (1 Corinthians 12:28–29). This is implied by naming prophecy as a separate gift of the Spirit. At the same time, Paul encouraged all believers to “desire... especially prophecy” (1 Corinthians 14:1), for the person who prophesies does so for the “strengthening, encouraging and comfort” (1 Corinthians 14:3) of others. There is no statute of limitations on the spirit of prophecy in the life of the Church.

The Church needs the prophetic function to strengthen, encourage, and comfort believers. A word of prophecy can warn, correct, predict, confirm, and console. Proper prophetic functioning remains crucial to today’s churches’ development, health, and well-being. As a spiritual gift, prophecy’s primary outcome is building up the body of Christ.

When people function in the prophetic, they must magnify the Lord, not themselves. They must not contradict the Bible. There are numerous ways to deliver a prophetic message. Those who serve in the prophetic should seek God for the proper method, timing, approach, tone, place, and audience. Much prophetic work is informal and not done in a formulaic way (as in “thus saith the Lord”). We all need to ask for ears to hear what God is speaking in all situations. Further, a person may receive a prophetic insight not to be shared as a message but to be prayed for as a concern. Prophesying people must be praying people.

A word of prophecy should be given as a message in context with a limited scope. No prophecies today carry the authority or weight of Scripture. The context for a prophetic word in 1 Corinthians 14 is the local congregation where the person speaking is better known and more accountable to the congregation. No prophetic word can be given that is insulated from the discernment or judgment of a community of believers who also

have the Spirit of God. No prophet can hide behind titles like “man of God” or “woman of God” when they speak to other Spirit-filled women and men of God.

Judging Prophecies

Paul called churches to weigh or judge prophecy carefully (1 Corinthians 14:29). Such judgment should begin with recognizing that the completion of the New Testament does not invalidate the ongoing need for prophecy as a spiritual gift for the Church. Despite the assertions of cessationists, prophecy did not end because the New Testament was completed. One reason they condemned spontaneous prophecy was the belief that it adds authoritative words to Scripture, thus cheapening the authority of Scripture overall.

Pentecostals responded to this charge by highlighting the authority of Scripture in judging spontaneous prophecy.² They held to Paul’s guidelines for exercising prophecy and judged the message against the whole of Scripture so that no prophecy contradicting the Bible was accepted. Pentecostals also limited the value of prophetic words to the particular context or community they are given rather than treating them as having authority over the whole Church. With these restrictions in practice and the presence of signs and wonders accompanying the spread of the gospel, more evangelicals have accepted the possibility of modern-day prophecy. Today, cessationism has fewer adherents than it did during the early years of Pentecostalism.

Scripture indicates how we should judge prophecy. Within the church, prophets speak for the edification of the community (1 Corinthians 14:26). While a prophetic word, like Scripture, may be given to rebuke, correct, and encourage (2 Timothy 3:16 through 4:2), it should be given for the good of the church. A prophet’s message should not be self-serving.

A prophetic word should also be exercised in an orderly manner and not cause unnecessary confusion. People may reject a prophetic word, but the reason for confusion or controversy should not be careless behavior by the speaker. No one giving a prophetic word should act as if they cannot control themselves because prophets

must know when and how to sit down and be silent for the good of the community (1 Corinthians 14:29–33).

A prophetic word must also be true. Prophecies may not all be predictive but will be informative. Every prophecy inspired by the Holy Spirit will be for the glory and truth of Jesus (John 16:14; 1 Corinthians 12:3; 1 John 4:2–3). Any prophecy which dishonors or disregards the authority of Jesus cannot be from God. Any prophecy that contradicts the clear teaching of Scripture cannot be from God. No prophecy of the Spirit can contradict the Spirit who inspired Scripture.

If a word of prophecy is predictive, we must be cautious and vigilant in assessing it. Some might deliver prophetic words that offer predictions of things with a fifty-fifty probability. Others may wrongly prophesy based on what can already be known. We must carefully distinguish between a prophetic word and a “good guess.” If a prophetic word offers a prediction so general that it cannot be discerned as invalid or false no matter what happens, we should not count that as a predictive prophecy that has come true.

Some predictive prophecies might be conditional and are given to generate a response rather than merely predict. Ninevites received a message of judgment, but their repentance led God to relent (Jonah 3:10). Hezekiah received a message about his impending death, but his cries to God led to a promise of healing (2 Kings 20:1–5). If the prophecy of soon-coming events does not come true and is not conditioned on the response of the recipients, then the prophecy is false. If the prophecy leads to a turning toward God and does not come true, it may still reflect the will of God in being given.

Prophecies must be judged according to:

1. their “why” or the intent of the message (Does it edify the Church?)
2. their “how” or the delivery of the message (Does it cause unnecessary confusion?)
3. their “what” or the meaning of the message (Is it biblical?)
4. the “who” or the one delivering the message (Are they trustworthy?). However, a stranger may give us a word from God, or a new believer may offer a prophetic

word despite being immature. Neither of those would invalidate a prophecy on their own.

Guidelines

1. Pastoral responsibility includes equipping the saints (Ephesians 4:12–13) to exercise spiritual gifts, including prophecy and discernment. Equipping someone involves preparing and correcting them. That correction must be done gently, or someone may never want to be used by God in that way again. At the same time, people must be taught that it is better to be corrected than to remain unavailable to God. Pastoral responsibilities also include teaching a congregation how to exercise discernment when a prophetic word is given.
2. Pastors can create an environment for prophetic activity within their community. Is the congregation attuned to the Holy Spirit and willing to listen? Have they been prepared to speak prophetically? Is the schedule open for the Holy Spirit to manifest the gift of prophecy? Is there enough trust within the community for people to step out in faith and speak?
3. The use of social media for the dissemination of prophecy is a serious concern. Prophecy works best where there is accountability. The potential audience for a prophetic word on social media platforms provides a loss of context, correction, and community from a prophetic word delivered in person. Every prophecy must be subject to pastoral correction and community discernment, regardless of how it is delivered.
4. Christians must learn to distinguish between genuine and false prophecies. A prophetic word that departs from biblical truth is false. Similarly, a prophetic message that, if believed, would turn a church away from the ways of Jesus is false. A prophetic word should not disciple people in the wrong direction.
5. The prophet who prophesies in a self-serving manner is false, while the prophet who lives a hidden life that does not represent godliness is untrustworthy. False prophets are more concerned about titles, honor, and personal power than serving humbly and sacrificially. They often charge for their ministry services and make demands of people, lording it over others. Instead of magnifying Jesus, they focus on their notoriety.

Jesus warned of false prophets who looked innocent but were inwardly like wolves. We can tell the difference between true and false prophets by the fruit of the Spirit they exhibit (Matthew 7:15–20). False prophets usually work independently, expanding their empire without proper local church covering. Rather than appreciating checks and balances, they often reject teaching and correction. Many appeal to people's itching ears and tell them what they want to hear. They expand their reach and control beyond God's authorization.

However, we should not allow a fear of false prophets to dissuade us from recognizing the value of prophecy as an ongoing gift of the Holy Spirit, broadly distributed throughout a responsive Church until Jesus comes. The Spirit sovereignly chooses and directs persons open and sensitive to His gifts and promptings and endows them variously with verbal gifts. Both men and women may expect to exercise the gift of prophecy in varied ways, as seen in the New Testament, to the glory of Jesus and the good of the Church.

Notes

1. All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV®. Copyright ©1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.® Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. www.zondervan.com.
2. Cecil M. Robeck, Jr., “*Prophecy, Prophesying,*” in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters* (InterVarsity Press, 1993), 761–762.

NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION® AND NIV® ARE REGISTERED TRADEMARKS OF BIBLICA, INC. USE OF EITHER TRADEMARK FOR THE OFFERING OF GOODS OR SERVICES REQUIRES THE PRIOR WRITTEN CONSENT OF BIBLICA US, INC.

A BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE ON ORDINATION: THE RECOGNITION OF A CALL TO MINISTRY

(Adopted by the General Presbytery in session August 4, 2020)

Introduction

Ministry is the word most often used to identify the work of the Christian clergy. In its biblical sense, however, *ministry* is a more comprehensive term that properly denotes the work of the whole Church, the body of Christ in the world. Ministry is what the Church does in obedience to the commands of her Lord.

Our English word *ministry* translates several words in the New Testament, the most prominent being *diakonia* (“service, ministry”) and its related forms. The *diakonia* word group, including also the verb *diakoneō* (“to serve, minister”) and the noun *diakonos* (“servant, minister, deacon”), occurs about one hundred times and denotes most basically the humble service one person renders to another. In New Testament times, it was often the work of a servant who waited tables or fulfilled other menial tasks.

Jesus—The Model for Ministry

Ministry in the New Testament is taught and modeled by Jesus Christ and can never be understood or realized apart from Him. Therefore, a biblical study of ministry may adequately begin with the life and teachings of our Lord, as presented in the New Testament.

Ministry is *incarnational*. In Jesus of Nazareth, God came to dwell among human beings. The Gospel of John affirms, “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us” (John 1:14).¹ Matthew’s designation of the virgin-born Jesus as “Immanuel... God with us” (Matthew 1:23) teaches much the same. The Son of God took upon Himself full humanity to draw near to His human creatures and secure their redemption through the atoning sacrifice of the Cross. As Paul expressed it, “God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ” (2 Corinthians 5:19).

Ministry is *kerygmatic*. Drawn from the noun *kērygma* (“proclamation”), this term highlights the central place of the preaching of the gospel. Nowhere is this more evident than in Jesus’ Nazareth sermon, “The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor” (Luke 4:18–19; reading Isaiah 61:1–2).

Ministry is *empowered by the Holy Spirit*. The Gospels strikingly depict the descent of the Spirit upon Jesus at the outset of His ministry, immediately after His baptism and

before His public activity (Matthew 3:16; Mark 1:10; Luke 3:22; John 1:32). Peter described this event as an “anointing,” which empowered Jesus for His work: “After the baptism that John preached... God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and... he went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him” (Acts 10:37–38). Jesus Himself frequently referred to the power of the Spirit at work in His miracles (Matthew 12:28; Luke 4:14, 18).

Ministry is *humble service*. In counteracting the self-serving instincts of the disciples, Jesus pointed to the nature of His ministry: “Even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45). Luke also reported Jesus’ words, “I am among you as one who serves” (Luke 22:27). Nowhere is Jesus’ attitude better illustrated than at the Last Supper, where He chastened His competitive followers: “Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another’s feet” (John 13:14).

Ministry is *shepherding*. Jesus depicted Himself as a faithful and caring shepherd who knows each of His sheep and leads each out to water and pasture (cf. John 10:1–18). Never abusing or exploiting, the Good Shepherd interposes His own body between the sheep and all dangers. Repeatedly Jesus made the point, “The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep” (John 10:11, 15, 17, 18). Elsewhere in the New Testament, He is called the “great Shepherd” (Hebrews 13:20), “the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls” (1 Peter 2:25), and the “Chief Shepherd” (1 Peter 5:4).

Ministry is *relational*. Early in His ministry, Jesus called the Twelve to be with Him (Matthew 10:1–4; Mark 3:13–19; Luke 6:12–16). These, His disciples (also known as apostles), were intimately involved with Jesus throughout His earthly ministry. Jesus invested Himself in them, teaching and training them for their service during His human life and beyond. He questioned them and answered their questions, taught, and entrusted them with the ministry.

The ministry of Jesus culminated in His death, which He willingly suffered as a substitutionary offering for the sins of humanity (Matthew 26:28; Mark 10:45). He gave Himself, in life and death, for others.

The Church as the Extension of Christ's Ministry

The Gospels show that Jesus intended to extend His ministry through the Church, which He would found and build (Matthew 16:18). One of His earliest actions was calling designated apostles “that they might be with him and that he might send them out to preach” (Mark 3:14), as He did.

After His death and resurrection, Christ explicitly commissioned the apostles to carry on His ministry. Claiming all authority in heaven and on earth, He charged them, “Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you” (Matthew 28:19–20).

Maintaining this emphasis, Luke records Jesus' prophecy that repentance and forgiveness of sins would be preached in His name to all nations. The disciples were to be His witnesses, and for that purpose they would shortly receive the promised heavenly power (Luke 24:46–49). John's Gospel describes Jesus' commission to the disciples: “As the Father has sent me, I am sending you” (20:21). It was then Jesus breathed on them and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit” (20:22).

Awareness of a derived and continuing ministry moved the disciples to seek a replacement for Judas. Casting lots to distinguish between Barsabbas and Matthias, they prayed, “Lord,... show us which of these two you have chosen to take over this apostolic ministry, which Judas left to go where he belongs” (Acts 1:24–25). In selecting seven men to handle the social services of the Early Church, the apostles were conscious of the primacy of their ministry of the Word (Acts 6:4). The central task of leadership in the Early Church was anointed proclamation of God's Word to His people.

Participation in ministry was not limited to the Twelve, nor even to the larger group of apostles that included Paul, James, and others as well. Fellow workers of the apostles were readily called *diakonos* or “minister”: Phoebe (Romans 16:1); Tychicus (Ephesians 6:21, NASB);² Epaphras (Colossians 1:7, NRSV);³ Timothy (1 Timothy 4:6). Others are said to participate in *diakonia* or “ministry”: the household of Stephanas (1 Corinthians 16:15, NASB), Archippus (Colossians 4:17, NASB), and Mark (2 Timothy 4:11). Qualified elders were chosen and prayerfully commissioned for ministry in each new missionary church (Acts 14:23). Ministry, then, was not the sole prerogative of an apostolic or priestly elite to be passed down from generation to generation by a rite of apostolic succession. It was a pervasive and vibrant gift of the Spirit, shaping and energizing leaders wherever the Church was planted.

The Role of the Holy Spirit in Ministry

The necessity of a spiritual endowment for ministry is apparent in Jesus and the apostles. The descent of the Spirit upon Jesus at His baptism was a prerequisite to His ministry (Mark 1:9–13). Jesus specifically instructed the apostles to remain in Jerusalem until they had received the promised Holy Spirit (Luke 24:49; Acts 1:4–5). Only after baptism in the Spirit on the Day of Pentecost were they thrust into public ministry. From that point, their ministries were carried out with a striking sense of the Spirit’s power and wisdom. The Acts narrative demonstrates that Spirit baptism, followed by continual Spirit enablement, is essential to effective Christian ministry.

Paul’s understanding of his induction into ministry is revealing. “I became a servant of this gospel by the gift of God’s grace given me through the working of his power” (Ephesians 3:7). Paul was undoubtedly conscious of being “called” (Romans 1:1). He also possessed excellent theological training (Acts 22:3). But in describing his ministry, it was far more natural for him to speak of an inner work of the Spirit, which supernaturally gifted him to be a minister of the gospel of Christ.

That same sense of sovereign, supernatural action in the preparation of ministers is present in Paul's exhortations to the elders of Ephesus, as recounted in Acts, "Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers" (Acts 20:28). While in all probability Paul had been instrumental in the public ordination of these elders, he was deeply aware of a powerful, prior work of the Spirit that their public "ordination" merely facilitated.

Historically, the Church has spoken of the divine summons to vocational ministry as a "call to the ministry." Indeed, the Scriptures frequently indicate that God does summon individuals to devote their lives, especially to His service. Abraham (Genesis 12:1), Moses (Exodus 3:6, 10), and Isaiah (Isaiah 6:8–9) are Old Testament examples. In the New Testament, Jesus personally called the Twelve (Mark 3:13–14), and the Holy Spirit prophetically set apart Paul and Barnabas for their missionary assignment (Acts 13:2).

The Scriptures also support the Church's traditional concept of an inward call, to describe the individual's awareness of a divine summons to ministry, and an outward call that attests to the Church that God has indeed summoned the individual. But, it must always be remembered that those who are called to the ministry are first supernaturally gifted by the Spirit to fulfill that call. Like Paul, they become ministers "by the gift of God's grace . . . through the working of his power" (Ephesians 3:7).

Spiritual Gifts for Ministry

If ministry is indeed effected by the gifting and energy of the Spirit, then the New Testament emphasis on spiritual gifts assumes even greater significance. Paul, especially, urges attention to spiritual gifts. To the Corinthians, he wrote, "Therefore you do not lack any spiritual gift" (1 Corinthians 1:7). And to the Romans, he wrote, "I long to see you so that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to make you strong" (Romans 1:11). Though in this last instance, Paul used the words *charisma* and *pneumatikon* together, his preferred term for a spiritual gift

is *charisma*. Less frequently, he also used the term *pneumatikon*, which also means “spiritual gift” (1 Corinthians 12:1, 28; 14:1).

A wide range of spiritual gifts affects and accompanies the multifaceted ministry already observed in the New Testament. The Acts of the Apostles, with repeated emphasis upon the Spirit’s powerful and wise direction of the Christian mission, with many signs and wonders, appears to be a narrative theology of spiritual gifts.

The broader teaching of the New Testament letters points out that a special gift (or gifts) of the Spirit has been given to every believer to qualify him or her for one or more special ministries: “To each one of us grace was given according to the measure of Christ’s gift” (Ephesians 4:7, NASB).

“We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us” (Romans 12:6). “Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good” (1 Corinthians 12:7). There is a similar emphasis in 1 Peter 4:10: “Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God’s grace in its various forms.” The writer to the Hebrews noted that “God also testified to it [the salvation announced first by the Lord Jesus] by signs, wonders and various miracles, and by gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will” (Hebrews 2:4).

Several relevant lists of spiritual gifts are included in the New Testament. There are the familiar nine gifts of the Spirit in 1 Corinthians 12:8–10, message of wisdom, message of knowledge, faith, gifts of healing, miraculous powers, prophecy, distinguishing between spirits, speaking in different kinds of tongues, interpretation of tongues. Several of these gifts are also found in the lists of Romans 12:6–8; 1 Corinthians 12:28–30; and Ephesians 4:11.

These nine gifts may easily be recognized as supernatural and spontaneous, always under the immediate control of the Spirit, who uses obedient and sensitive believers in their manifestation. But sprinkled among the gift lists are other critical spiritual gifts for carrying on the work of the Church. They are serving (Romans 12:7), teaching (Romans

12:7), encouraging (Romans 12:8), giving (Romans 12:8), leadership (Romans 12:8), showing mercy (Romans 12:8), helping others (1 Corinthians 12:28), and guidance (1 Corinthians 12:28). These gifts are not so readily recognized as supernatural, but nonetheless have their origin and energy in the work of the Holy Spirit who sovereignly equips believers to be used regularly, energetically, and conscientiously in the service of the Church.

Although the gifts that are listed probably cover most ministry needs of the Church, there is no reason to think the New Testament writers intended to be comprehensive. For example, there is no reference to gifts of music, though the New Testament does mention “spiritual songs” (Ephesians 5:19). The Old Testament attributes gifts of craftsmanship to the Holy Spirit (Exodus 31:2–3). It is reasonable to think the Spirit grants other gifts to the Church to meet specific needs. Paul seemed at great pains to emphasize variety: “There are different kinds of gifts [*charisma*], . . . different kinds of service [*diakonia*], ...different kinds of working (*energēma*)” (1 Corinthians 12:4–6).

In every case, these gifts are set within the context of the Church and designed for ministry to and through the body of Christ in its fulfillment of the Great Commission. Before noting the “different kinds of working” of Romans 12:6, Paul stressed the Church’s interdependence, “We, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others” (Romans 12:5). The gifts of 1 Corinthians 12:28–30 are prefaced by a similar statement, “Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it” (1 Corinthians 12:27). The rationale for the gifts of Ephesians 4:11 is “to equip his people for works of service [*diakonia*], so that the body of Christ may be built up” (Ephesians 4:12).

The purpose of spiritual gifts is most clearly expressed in 1 Corinthians 12:7, “Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good.” Spiritual gifts are intended for the upbuilding of the congregation at-large. Their only justification is to serve the purposes of Christ in His church, a lesson lost on the immature Corinthians who demeaned the gifts by their proud exhibitionism.

It is also to be emphasized that just as the Spirit comes upon all who believe in the Lord Jesus Christ without respect to ethnicity, age, or sex, so spiritual gifts, the essential tools of ministry, are bestowed upon all. The implications for the ministry of women, especially, must not be ignored.

Ministry Belongs to the Entire Church

Our study of ministry and spiritual gifts makes it clear that ministry is the work of the entire body of Christ, not just of a priestly or clerical caste. Even the ministries of apostle, prophet, evangelist, and pastor-teacher do not exist as ends in themselves or as rewards for a select elite. They are expressly given “to equip his people for works of service (*diakonia*), so that the body of Christ may be built up” (Ephesians 4:12).

Every member of the body of Christ participates in the ministry of the Church; all are called in some way to be ministers. To be baptized into Christ is to be baptized into the ministry of His church. No group of leaders alone can embody the full spectrum of spiritual gifts and provide all the wisdom and energy required to do the work of the Church. The ministry of the congregation at-large is integral to the accomplishment of the mission of the Church.

Spiritual gifting for ministry is also without regard to race or sex. Wherever the Church exists, the Holy Spirit pours out His gifts, “and he distributes them to each one, just as he determines” (1 Corinthians 12:11). Spiritual gifts are bestowed as widely as the blessing of salvation in which “there is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28).

Consequently, there is no scriptural basis for excluding any believer from the gifting of the Holy Spirit. “ ‘In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy. ...Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy’ ” (Acts 2:17–18, from Joel 2:28–29). Both the teachings and the historical examples of the New Testament show

that women and men of various ethnic backgrounds were granted spiritual gifts for the ministry of the Church.

Ordination as Recognition of Spiritual Leadership

A robust, biblical doctrine of the ministry of the laity may at first appear to diminish the necessity and importance of ordained clergy (those who are specially set apart for the leadership of the Church). On the contrary, it heightens the need, for the laity must be spiritually formed, trained, and led on a massive scale if the mission of the Church is to be accomplished. Scripture emphasizes that ministry leaders are Christ's gifts for the explicit purpose of preparing the people of God for their ministries of building up the Church (Ephesians 4:7–13).

The selection and preparation of spiritual leaders is a crucial matter throughout the New Testament. Jesus' appointment and nurture of the first apostles provided servant-leaders who exercised a vital leadership role in the Early Church. The Twelve were also aided by people like Stephen (Acts 6), Philip (Acts 8), and Barnabas (Acts 13), whom the Spirit singularly marked out for leadership in advancing the mission of the Church. These and others are to be found among an expanding leadership group in the New Testament.

Paul and Barnabas were careful to appoint elders for leadership in each new church (Acts 14:23). For that appointment, Luke used a verb (*cheirotoneō*), which means "to choose, to appoint or elect by raising hands." Thus, the congregations may well have had a part in the selection, as in the choice of the "seven" in the Jerusalem church (Acts 6:1–6). These appointments were made in a context of prayer, fasting, and apparently with some kind of public "ordination" service.

Divine initiative in the appointment of spiritual leaders is fundamental to New Testament theology. Instructing the churches he had established, Paul wrote, "And God has appointed in the church, first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles,

then gifts of healings, helps, administrations, various kinds of tongues” (1 Corinthians 12:28, NASB).

First, note that these “offices” (or “ministries”) are of divine origin. Second, they are arranged in a specific order—first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then Spirit-gifted individuals with a wide array of spiritual gifts, both miraculous (e.g., “healings” and “tongues”) and functional (e.g., “administrations”) Third, all these ministries are charismatic, in that they are granted and energized as specific gifts of God by His Spirit. Fourth, the ministries of both the “leaders” and the “led,” the “pastors” and the “parishioners,” flow from the *charismata*, the spiritual gifts.

Paul wrote in much the same way in his letter to Ephesus. “So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers” (Ephesians 4:11). These ministries are not provided by human initiative, but by the grace (4:7) of the risen Lord Jesus Christ, who “gave gifts to his people” (4:8).

Ordination of Ministry Leaders

The Assemblies of God Statement of Fundamental Truths, statement 11. The Ministry, asserts that “a divinely called and scripturally ordained ministry has been provided by our Lord for the fourfold purpose of leading the Church in: (1) evangelization of the world (Mark 16:15–20), (2) worship of God (John 4:23–24), (3) building a Body of saints being perfected in the image of His Son (Ephesians 4:11, 16), and (4) meeting human need with ministries of love and compassion (Psalm 112:9; Galatians 2:10; 6:10; James 1:27).”⁴

The Assemblies of God has chosen to denote three classifications of ministry—the certified minister, the licensed minister, and the ordained minister. The church also recognizes a fourth classification, the local church credential, a limited credential granted by a local assembly. *Ordination* is the term used for the highest level of ministerial classification the Assemblies of God recognizes, a classification available to both men and women.⁵ All ministers are encouraged to progress to ordination.

Ordination, the highest classification, allows ministers to express their commitment to present to the Lord the best of their service to His call on their lives.

The selection of spiritual leaders throughout Scripture is usually recognized in a public way that signifies the spiritual origins of the call. In the Old Testament, a formal anointing with oil, bringing with it the power of the Spirit, accompanied God's selection. Jesus purposefully drew the twelve disciples aside and appointed them to be apostles (Mark 3:13–19). Judas's successor was prayerfully and publicly chosen (Acts 1:15–26). When the seven deacons were chosen, the apostles prayed and "laid their hands on them" (Acts 6:6). Similarly, when the Spirit announced His choice of Paul and Barnabas for missionary service, the decision was followed by fasting, prayer, and the laying on of hands (Acts 13:2–3).

Paul's letters to Timothy, who represents a younger generation of ministers, imply a kind of formal ordination. At some unidentified point, Paul and a body of elders laid hands on Timothy to set him apart for the ministry. The work of the Spirit in Timothy's ordination is also noteworthy, "Do not neglect your gift, which was given you through prophecy when the body of elders laid their hands on you" (1 Timothy 4:14). Moreover, Paul continued to mentor his young colleague, reminding him to "fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands" (2 Timothy 1:6).

The practice of selecting and "ordaining" qualified elders, crucial to the success of the missionary churches, became a strategic step for Paul's ministry team. Following the pattern of his first missionary journey (Acts 14:23), Paul commanded Titus, charged with setting the churches of Crete in order, "appoint elders in every town" (Titus 1:5). Timothy, likewise, had as a part of his ministry similar tasks in the appointment and supervision of elders (1 Timothy 5:17–22).

The Meaning and Value of Ordination

Because the Assemblies of God strives to model after the biblical practice of highly vetted, faithful, and publicly accountable leadership on every level, the term *ordination* is chosen to speak of the highest, most respected ministry status.

Ordination publicly expresses the value of one's call to ministry. The divine call to ministry is paramount in importance; God chooses human vessels to lead His church and to prepare its members for service to the Kingdom. The Church has the privilege of acknowledging that call in a public ceremony that shows the value of the minister whom God has called and equipped for His service.

Ordination affirms the minister's divine call to ministry. There is the internal assurance that God has called one to ministry, and that inner conviction is crucial. Ordination allows the Church to come alongside the minister, affirming what he or she knows deep within. The ordination service becomes an "Ebenezer stone" type moment (1 Samuel 7:12) to which the ordinees can return throughout their ministry to remind them of the assurance of God's call upon their lives.

Ordination communicates to the candidate the affirmation of the Church on their call to and involvement in ministry. The ultimate recognition for all ministry must come from the Lord, who issued the call. It is before Him that all are called into account and from whom endorsement comes. However, it also is granted to the leadership of the earthly expression of the Church the privilege of giving a word of affirmation and encouragement to the minister.

Ordination establishes one's call with those outside of the Church. The actual ceremony is conducted within the confines of the community of faith, but it speaks to the broader community. The watching world, which is the focus of evangelism and compassion, can be assured that the ordinees have evidenced the divine call on their lives and received the recognition of that from the Church.

Ordination advances the relationship between ordinees and the Church. It has been noted that ministry is, among other descriptors, relational. Expectations from the Church are placed on the ordinees: loyalty, support, fidelity to the faith, proper lifestyle, etc. The ordinees can expect the Church to provide support, mentorship, fellowship, opportunities to advance in ministry, confidentiality, and investment in their lives. Jesus invested Himself in the lives of the Twelve by teaching, training, and engaging in their spiritual growth, and Paul invested himself in Timothy and Titus (and others) by modeling and trusting them with ministry. The Church will need to invest itself in the lives of the ordinees so they can fully carry out the call of God on their lives.

Conclusion

The apostle Paul expressed in his first letter to Timothy so clearly the attitude that denotes the one called to the Christian ministry: “I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has given me strength, that he considered me trustworthy, appointing me to his service” (1 Timothy 1:12). Paul continues in this passage to admit personal unworthiness and marvels that “the grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly” (1:14). The call to ministry in His church is the expression of His grace and not the result of human effort.

Ordination, then, is the recognition of that grace of God that has marked the candidates, calling them into His service, and evidenced by the candidates’ ministry in their area of calling. It is a great privilege to have the Church recognize what God has done in the life of individuals and to come alongside to strengthen each one in their ministry.

Notes

1. Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture references and quotations are from the New International Version, 2011 (NIV).
2. Scripture quotations marked (*NASB*®) are taken from the New American Standard Bible®, Copyright ©1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995 by The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission. (Lockman.org)
3. “NRSV” refers to the New Revised Standard Version ©1989.

4. For further explanation of the Assemblies of God position on qualification and expectations for, and process of ministerial recognition, including ordination, see the Assemblies of God Bylaws, Article VII, “Ministry.”
5. See Assemblies of God Bylaws, Article VII, Section 2, paragraph I. Also, see the Assemblies of God Position Paper, “The Role of Women in Ministry,” <https://ag.org/Beliefs/Position-Papers/The-Role-of-Women-in-Ministry>.

POSITION PAPER ON PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES IN THE MINISTRY OF THE CHURCH

(Adopted by the General Presbytery in session, August 5-6, 2024)

Summary

¹The experience of disability is highly individualized, and the Church needs to understand and prepare for appropriate responses to disability. The Bible does not offer a one-size-fits-all approach. However, the Bible teaches that every believer belongs to the same body of Christ. Churches should examine and work toward accessibility within their facilities, worship services, and ministries. While God may heal people of a disability, some persons view their disability as integral to their identity. They connect their disability to their calling and service to God. All churches should prepare to minister to and receive ministry from those with disabilities, physical or intellectual, to include all members of the body of Christ.

Understanding Disability

The Church can play a meaningful role in the lives of people with disabilities. At the same time, people with disabilities can also play a powerful role in the life of the Church. The Church must respond appropriately to biblical teaching and resist the temptation to view persons with disabilities as people waiting only for healing or a hug. Instead, Christians with disabilities have received the same Spirit as every other believer. The

Holy Spirit is the one who provides gifts for ministry and sanctifies believers for the same purpose and mission.

Language of Disability

Understanding and communication about disability necessarily includes how people use language describing disability. Person-first language avoids even unintentionally equating a person's whole identity with his or her disability. Using a phrase like "a person with a disability" when necessary acknowledges that disability is part of their experience without implying it is their primary experience or identity. On the other hand, when one uses language like "a disabled person," it identifies the person based on their disability. People with disabilities may choose the words that refer to their experience of disability.

Second, avoid using words or phrases with a history of perpetuating prejudice. For instance, terms such as "retarded" and "cripple" are unacceptable. Historically, some have used similar words in a derogatory way. Eliminate these in the spirit of kindness, gentleness, and love.

Finally, regarding language use, choose words carefully regardless of whether any given word may offend a person with a disability. Sensitivity to words helps prevent reducing any person to his or her disability. Language forms our understanding of the world around us, both intentionally and unintentionally.

Experiences of Disability

The experience of living with a disability is unique for each person, which makes defining and understanding disability complex. In simple terms, a disability is a physical, intellectual, or developmental impairment that limits one's ability to carry out daily life activities and restricts one's participation in the surrounding community and society. A disability may also be the occasion for new abilities to emerge, such as reading braille, communicating through sign language, using senses to interact with the world in new ways, etc.

Some disabilities are apparent, while others are not. Hidden disabilities could include chronic illness, autism spectrum disorder, dementia, and epilepsy. A disability is not necessarily the same thing as an illness. And while sicknesses can result in disabilities, sickness does not cause all disabilities. A disability may be present at birth, initially displayed in childhood, or acquired through an accident, lack of physical care, an act of violence, as a natural result of aging, etc.

People with a disability are a unique minority group because anyone can become disabled at any time. Therefore, disability concerns everyone because it is possible for anyone to experience disability at some point. The entire Church should fully include those with disabilities since Jesus commanded Christians to love each other as He loved us (John 15:12; 1 John 4:21).

Living with one or more disabilities is a multifaceted experience. It is unique for every person due to the nature and circumstances surrounding the disability or disabilities, the support of their community, and their relationship with God. Disabilities have physical, social, and spiritual dimensions, with each dimension interacting with the others. For someone who experiences the loss of a limb, the impact of that loss on their emotional and spiritual development (including their ability to adapt) may be very different from that of someone born without the same limb. At the same time, how persons with disabilities interpret their experience will profoundly shape their relationship with God and their community.

Disability in the Bible

The Bible offers varied views of disability. Some disabilities are the result of old age (Genesis 27:1; 48:10; 1 Samuel 3:2; Ecclesiastes 12:1–5). Other disabilities resulted from disobedience to God (1 Kings 13:4; Daniel 4:31–34; Acts 13:11). Other disabilities seemed to result neither from old age nor divine justice (Genesis 32:31; John 9:1–6; Acts 3:1–8). Some who lived with a disability were leaders and ministers among the people of God (Exodus 4:10–12; 2 Corinthians 12:8–9). While God provided

supernatural healing in some cases, others did not experience healing from their disability in this life (2 Samuel 9:13; Acts 8:39).

Throughout the Scriptures, the people of God have included people with disabilities. The Bible includes stories of the social and spiritual dimensions of disability, and the experiences vary. Biblical characters remain part of God's story regardless of whether they received healing or not. Their impairment did not prevent them from exercising their God-given roles and may have opened other opportunities for service.

Disability and the Church

Those who belong to Jesus belong to the body of Christ, which “will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ” (Ephesians 4:15).² God has given gifts to every member for serving in and through the body of Christ in harmony (1 Corinthians 12:7–27), supporting every other member in their trials and triumphs. Using the body of Christ as a reference point reveals that the community's role in the lives of those with disabilities includes both ministry to persons with disabilities and receiving ministry from persons with disabilities.

Ministry to People with Disabilities

The biblical command to “serve one another humbly in love” (Galatians 5:13) includes all believers. The Church often ministers well to persons with acute illnesses and injuries, where the natural healing process or the miracle of divine healing seems possible or likely. However, in situations where disability is long-term or presumed permanent, the person may experience a challenge in faith. Faith and practice must include a compassionate hand extended and a willingness to walk with those with disabilities, sharing human dignity and the redemptive work of the Holy Spirit.

The challenges to church leadership include (1) affirming and ministering to those with disabilities, (2) ensuring their full integration into church life and activity as equal members in the body of Christ, and (3) remembering their caregivers in church ministry.

The Church must also care for the caregivers. Caregiving can feel like a thankless ministry, especially when those receiving care can't say thank you. It can be difficult to serve a loved one with a terminal illness or an impairment that requires vigilant attention. At times, it may feel to the caregiver as if their life is not their own. Caregivers can become "weary in doing good" (Galatians 6:9) and may wrestle with their spiritual and mental health.

Ministry to any segment of society has challenges, including ministry to people with disabilities. Volunteers may grow impatient when there are limited positive responses. Ministry may be especially taxing when there is significant cognitive impairment. An inability to relate fully to someone does not indicate their ability to relate to God or participate in the kingdom of God. Where medication, therapy, pain, and slow deterioration persist, so does God's love for us. His love motivates the Church's ministry to people with disabilities as ministry to Christ himself (Matthew 25:40).

Given the imperative laid down by Jesus Christ for discipling people of all groups, local churches must commit to making their facilities accessible to all. Statistically, every community will include people with disabilities.³ If churches have no members with disabilities, this may indicate multiple barriers preventing people with disabilities from becoming part of that community.

Financial realities may prohibit many smaller congregations from making immediate accessibility improvements to their facilities. These congregations should do whatever is possible to allow people with disabilities to participate in church life. This is demonstrated in Mark 2:1–12 by the men who carried a man who was paralyzed, opened a hole in the roof of a house where Jesus was preaching, and lowered the man into the house. Think of accommodation as a reaction to barriers found in the way of those with disabilities, while striving toward accessibility means acting proactively on behalf of those with disabilities.

Don't view accommodation as a replacement for accessibility but as the first step toward it. Consequently, every local congregation should review the accessibility of their

facilities and make improvements where needed. Our responsibility as representatives of the kingdom of God is to include those with disabilities in church functions and worship. Carefully and creatively considering seating arrangements will say, “Let us worship Christ together.” Volunteers demonstrate Christ’s priority of inclusion when showing kindness to worshippers with physical, mental, or intellectual disabilities and their caregivers.

The Church’s mission to worship God corporately requires the involvement of all believers, including those with disabilities. A performance-driven approach to weekly gatherings where the congregation functions primarily as an audience is unhealthy and should not hinder this mission. The primary requirement for someone to participate should not be a measure of stagecraft. Evaluate success in corporate worship less by the quality of individual performances and more by the fullness of community participation. Some persons with disabilities may participate in ways that make others uncomfortable because of a disability. As long as behavior is not inappropriate, people can be taught to recognize that participation as a form of worship. Learning to receive those whom God has already accepted remains a significant part of Christian discipleship. Weekly church gatherings may become less predictable when all believers, including those with intellectual disabilities, contribute to the gathering, but the worship of God will become richer with everyone’s involvement.

Sermons should present God’s Word without prejudice toward persons with disabilities. Preachers must discern if biblical texts describe what took place or prescribe what to do today. One such example includes ancient theories for blindness. Many ancient people thought blindness could result from an underlying sin (John 9:2), the result of a “dark eye,” that is, an eye that cannot properly emit light or shows a person’s ignorance. (Ancient thought assumed that light originated in the eye.)

Instead of replicating the views of Ancient Near Eastern or Mediterranean cultures, which can denigrate physically blind people in our congregations today, the preacher ought to consider the prescriptive application of such texts. Jesus asserted that the man

born blind was not physically disabled as a result of sin (John 9:3), despite the opinion of others. Jesus also empowered Bartimaeus to speak over and against a ridiculing crowd by including and healing him (Mark 10:46–52). In this story, Bartimaeus possessed critical information about Jesus (as the Son of David): he was not ignorant as some in the crowd might assume. As Jesus demonstrated here, the preacher ought to consider how to empower persons with disabilities and not feel excluded by the preaching of Scripture.

Persons with Intellectual Disabilities

While any disability can have a spiritual impact, this is especially true concerning those with intellectual disabilities. Persons with intellectual disabilities can include persons born with developmental challenges as well as persons who develop challenges, such as dementia, later in life. God can save, heal, and fill with the Holy Spirit those people with intellectual disabilities. They can respond to the conviction and the comfort of the Holy Spirit. A recognizable level of comprehension does not limit the work of the Holy Spirit.

God has entitled every person to a presentation of the gospel at their level of understanding. There are various aspects to consider for gospel presentations; age and cognitive functioning are most relevant here. Churches should offer appropriate Bible studies and worship services for a variety of cognitive levels. Avoid using functional programming simply to segregate some community members from others. This space is not for “putting people away” but for offering appropriate teaching. In all other respects, encourage people with intellectual disabilities to participate in the life of the local church and the body of Christ at large.

Chronological age alone is irrelevant to moral or spiritual accountability if comprehension is absent. Until a person reaches a stage of cognitive development necessary for accountability, or if in the case of intellectual impairment, she or he rests in God’s abundant mercies and grace. Most people with intellectual impairment have a moral compass, understand right from wrong, and can respond when the Holy Spirit

woos and convicts them. When people can choose the ordinances of water baptism and Communion, encourage them to do so.

Divine Healing and Persons with Disabilities

Some consider the promise of divine healing as the primary response of the Church to those living with disabilities. Divine healing is included in the Assemblies of God Statement of Fundamental Truths, and the position paper entitled “Divine Healing” elaborates further on the topic. Healing can occur in many ways (Mark 16:18; 1 Corinthians 12:9–10; James 5:14–16) but remains a gift of grace by a sovereign God. God’s will to heal is governed by the fulfillment of His creative purpose. Both the Old and New Testaments show that the timing of divine healing has always been in God’s hands.

Those ministering to people with disabilities during healing ministry need spiritual discernment. The physical eyes cannot be the only way to determine someone’s needs. Often, intercessors seeking miracles target people in wheelchairs or with obvious physical needs, whether the person with the disability wants prayer for healing or not. Never assume that the most pressing need is physical healing; instead ask the person (Mark 10:51). Likewise, those who pray should not judge the results of their prayers by what they see. They may not know, without asking, how the Spirit of God has ministered to a person. Like others, people with disabilities have many needs and concerns in life, whether related to their disability or not. They may experience the healing power of God in mighty ways without Him healing their disability.

Some people have embraced a disability as a gift and do not seek healing. For those to whom a presumed disability is more of an identity or opportunity for service, it can be especially offensive to assume that their need is for physical healing. For example, someone with blindness or who is deaf may be comfortable with their ability to navigate the world and may find that their circumstance gives them access to otherwise closed communities and ministries. The social dimension of their disability may be very different from those who cried out to Jesus in the Gospels for healing. To treat a

disability as a problem that requires God's healing is to minimize the rich life God has already given them.

People with disabilities who desire healing should not lose faith in the will or power of God to heal. Anyone who has ever received their healing was not healed the day before; healing may still lie in the future. The Church must take care not to assume that divine healing is the only concern of those with disabilities.

Ministry by People with Disabilities

The Great Commission is a call to make disciples of all peoples. Discipling and equipping people with disabilities to use their gifts to build the body of Christ is what the Lord empowers us to do as ministers (Ephesians 4:11–13). As a member of the body of Christ, every believer, regardless of ability, is equipped by the Spirit of God to minister. A church that does not incorporate the Spirit-empowered abilities of those with disabilities is an impoverished church.

The Church must resist the temptation to view persons with disabilities as recipients of ministry only, rather than those who have received the same Spirit who distributes gifts as He will to every believer (1 Corinthians 12:4–7). Instead, the Church should submit to one another, including people with disabilities, as equally gifted ministers within the community (Ephesians 5:21).

The ministry of those with disabilities creates opportunities for evangelism that may not exist otherwise. Nonbelievers with disabilities and their families may never feel comfortable in a Christian community without believers who share equally in both disability and the ministry of the Church. Believers with disabilities can bear a meaningful witness to Christ as those who understand the struggle.

There is a great need for the witness of believers with disabilities. For example, some regard the Deaf community as an unreached people group.⁴ Reasons for this include the lack of interpreters in churches and an assumption that some churches do not care

about the Deaf. God can use Deaf believers to reach the Deaf community and beyond. Being Deaf is a calling that provides an opportunity to ministry that other believers may not possess.

Persons with Intellectual Disabilities

Intellectual disability encompasses a wide range of functioning ability, from severe or profound to partial or complete independence. The Church should remain sensitive to the Holy Spirit regarding the spiritual giftedness of those with an intellectual disability. People with intellectual disabilities can bear witness to the gospel in their own way. The church should not engage in intellectual prejudice concerning God's call (1 Corinthians 1:26). Congregations can receive their gifts with joy and awe at God's creative diversity in life.

Guidelines

All believers in Jesus belong to the body of Christ. Together, God expects us to “grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows, and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work” (Ephesians 4:15–16). Without appropriate ministry to believers with disabilities, the Church cannot fulfill God's calling to be the community that “grows, and builds itself up in love.” Without ministry by believers with disabilities, the Church cannot be that community where “each part does its work.” God has given persons with disabilities to His Church, and vice versa. May we be the Church that is growing fully into Christ as we:

1. Listen to persons with disabilities. Hear what words and phrases they use (e.g., some prefer “Deaf” and others “person with blindness”). Understand how they perceive and navigate barriers in the life of the Christian community. Allow them to narrate their own experience of disability.
2. Strive to make facilities and worship accessible to fully integrate persons with disabilities into the local church. The goal is not only to welcome people but also to allow for the full participation of every member in corporate worship.

3. Understand that caregivers of persons with disabilities can sometimes feel forgotten. Consider support groups, check-ins, respite care, etc., as ways of supporting caregivers and their families.
4. Proclaim the doctrine of divine healing without fear but understand that persons with disabilities might not see a need for healing of their disability. There are many forms of healing, including physical, spiritual, emotional, and relational. Sometimes, a local church's greatest need for healing is the healing of a community so they can receive persons with disabilities as fellow disciples.
5. Equip persons with disabilities for works of service as the Bible commands. Work to discern their spiritual giftings and provide opportunities for them to exercise those gifts. Share the work of the church's ministry with the body of Christ in your congregation. In this way, we act like a "fellowship of the Holy Spirit" (2 Corinthians 13:14).
6. Take advantage of parachurch ministries that aim to help churches include persons with disabilities. Some of these ministries come from the Assemblies of God, while others have worked successfully with Assemblies of God churches.⁵
7. Make every effort to affirm the shared dignity of all believers as full-image bearers of God, including persons with disabilities. To recognize the fullness of the body of Christ as including all those called together in Christ Jesus is to bear witness to God's call in Christ. How the Church comes together is a matter of the gospel.

Notes

1. This paper is a revision of a now twenty-year-old position paper titled "Ministry to People with Disabilities: A Biblical Perspective" which itself was an abbreviated revision of a position paper entitled "A Biblical Perspective on People with Disabilities and the Great Commission: A Resource for Pastors," drafted by Special Touch Ministry, Inc.
2. Scripture quotations are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV®. Copyright ©1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.® Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. zondervan.com. The "NIV" and "New International Version" are trademarks registered in the United States Patent and Trademark Office by Biblica, Inc.®
3. In the United States, persons with disabilities made up 13 percent of the population in 2022 (see The United States Census Bureau report "S1810 Disability Characteristics"). Statistically, communities of eight or more could be expected to include persons with disabilities.
4. See the assumption from Chad Entinger, "The Deaf: An Unreached People Group Like Any Other," January 1, 2014, missionfrontiers.org/issue/article/the-deaf (accessed October 29, 2022). For more exact figures, see joshuaproject.net/people-groups/19007.
5. See the list of ministries to persons with disabilities under "Intercultural Ministries" at intercultural.ag.org.

POSITION PAPER ON PREMILLENNIAL ESCHATOLOGY

(Adopted by the General Presbytery in session, August 5-6, 2024)

Summary

From its founding, the Assemblies of God has affirmed the rapture of the Church, the return of Christ, and His premillennial reign. We do well to hold fast to these beliefs while being careful not to become preoccupied with details not clearly enunciated in the Statement of Fundamental Truths as supportable by Scripture. This paper explores the history and biblical support for premillennial eschatology and offers guidelines for teaching it.

Introduction

Eschatology refers to beliefs about the end times, including the second coming of Christ, millennial views, and other related issues. The Statement of Fundamental Truths affirms four key eschatological beliefs: Fundamental Truth 13, “The Blessed Hope;” Fundamental Truth 14, “The Millennial Reign of Christ;” Fundamental Truth 15, “The Final Judgment;” and Fundamental Truth 16, “The New Heavens and the New Earth.” The return of Jesus is one of the Assemblies of God’s four core doctrines, alongside salvation, Spirit baptism, and divine healing.

Our eschatology has been at the heart of our doctrinal beliefs since our founding in 1914 when the preamble to the Constitution and Bylaws declared, “‘Jesus is coming soon’ to this old world in the same manner as he left it to set up His millennial kingdom and to reign over the earth in righteousness and peace for a thousand years.”¹ This belief in the nearness of Christ’s coming has motivated us as a Fellowship to prioritize evangelism and worldwide missions efforts and to challenge people to live committed to Christ.

Different theological communities hold various views on the millennial reign of Christ. There is debate concerning the nature of the millennial reign as well as the order of events around that reign, including the return of Christ and the final judgment of the world. Some believe that when the Bible speaks of the millennial reign, it refers symbolically to the age of the Church between the ascension and return of Jesus, which will also bring about the final judgment. This is the amillennial position. Others believe that while the language symbolizes the Church Age, it refers to a time to come when the Church will establish kingdom-like conditions through the earth before the return of Christ and the final judgment. Postmillennialism views Christ's return as occurring after the millennial reign created through the church at some point in history. Additionally, some believe that Christ will return first, then set up a millennial kingdom, with the final judgment coming after those thousand years. Because Christ's return happens before the millennial reign, this is known as premillennialism.

Regardless of the disagreement among Christians, the Assemblies of God has maintained from its beginning that four eschatological events will occur in a particular order according to the Scripture. The resurrection of the saints will precede the millennial reign of Christ on the earth, after which comes the final judgment, and only then will God bring about the new heavens and new earth.

Historical Context

Church leaders affirmed a premillennial reading of Scripture in the first centuries after Jesus' ascension. Early Christian premillennial interpretation paralleled intertestamental interpretations, found in the books of Enoch and Jubilees, of Old Testament prophecy predicting a messianic kingdom. By the third century, there is evidence that more Christians chose an amillennial interpretation, possibly due to the loss of Jewish influence in the Church coupled with the rise of a Greek-inspired hermeneutic. With the rise of Christendom in the fourth century, most Christian leaders assumed an amillennial view. Some that held to the view that the millennium is symbolic of the

Church Age still believed in a literal one thousand years between the ascension and return of Jesus, but that became impossible to believe after the eleventh century.

Postmillennialism rose in popularity after the Protestant Reformation. The ongoing church reform led to hope for the eventual reform of society and a new age of church rule. This hope became associated with Protestant revivalism. Leaders of revival in the United States promoted postmillennialism. Proponents of the postmillennial impulse often associated with reform movements such as abolitionism. By the end of the nineteenth century, the Civil War and social problems from urbanization led many evangelicals to abandon the postmillennial view that the world was getting better. Instead, they looked for the imminent return of Christ to set up His millennial kingdom as the only hope for truly reforming the world.

The Pentecostal Movement began when views of Christ's coming were shifting from postmillennialism to premillennialism. One of the most common refrains in early Pentecostalism was that "Jesus is coming soon." The expectation that Jesus was coming "in the flesh" to establish His kingdom motivated Pentecostals to prepare the world for the return of Jesus—the answer to the world's complex social, spiritual, and moral problems.

When the Assemblies of God formed its doctrinal statement in 1916, it codified its premillennial beliefs in four eschatological doctrines. In particular, "The Blessed Hope" affirmed: "The Resurrection of those who have fallen asleep in Christ, the rapture of believers which are alive and remain, and the translation of the true Church, this is the blessed hope set before all believers."² The promise of Jesus' return included the promise of the resurrection of the dead and the transformation of the living into glorified bodies. In affirming the rapture, or resurrection, of the Church, the Assemblies of God also affirmed a belief in Christ's literal return to reign on earth for a thousand years. This view contradicts the views of postmillennialists and amillennialists. Pentecostals rejected both positions because they minimize the importance of Christ's imminent

bodily return to earth, as promised in the New Testament and affirmed by the Early Church.³

Over the past century, the General Council revised the Statement of Fundamental Truths several times, and eschatological doctrines received substantial revisions as certain situations demanded.⁴ In 1927, the General Council retitled and rewrote “Millennial Reign” to emphasize Israel’s role in Jesus’ millennial kingdom on earth when He comes. In 1961, the General Council revised “Millennial Reign” again to strengthen its emphasis on the literal millennial reign.⁵ In each case, the Assemblies of God wanted to clarify our position on the coming of Christ to reign on earth.

In addition to these revisions, the General Council passed resolutions that addressed various eschatological teachings that caused a distraction from these core doctrines. In 1917, the General Council discouraged ministers from setting dates for Christ’s return.⁶ In 1937, the General Council disapproved the teaching that Christians will go through a full seven-year tribulation because it denied the imminent return of Jesus.⁷ In 1961, the General Council responded to a growing number of ministers holding to amillennial views by including a prohibition of teaching amillennialism.⁸ In 2023, the General Council revised those bylaws to emphasize the right to address other views for educational purposes, but that ministers should refrain from “intentionally leading others astray” regarding the four core eschatological teachings of the Assemblies of God.

The Statement of Fundamental Truths clearly affirms premillennial doctrine, but it is important not to dogmatize other elements of end-time beliefs that are not specifically addressed. These include details about the identity of the Antichrist (2 Thessalonians 2:3; 2 John 7), the battle of Armageddon (Revelation 16:16), the mark of the Beast (Revelation 13:16–17), and the Great Tribulation (Matthew 24:21; Revelation 7:14). While ministers may have convictions about specific interpretations of these elements, they are secondary to the essential elements of our premillennial eschatology overall. As a Fellowship, we should have charity among our ranks about such debated issues and not divide over nonessentials not clearly stated in our Fundamental Truths.

Fundamental Truths 13 and 14

The Assemblies of God's doctrinal statements about the rapture of the Church and Christ's second coming are supported by various Scriptures that are important to the premillennial emphasis. Titus 2:13,⁹ which says, "We wait for the blessed hope—the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ," is the basis for Fundamental Truth 13. Paul's hope was that Christ will reward all those who "have longed for his appearing" (2 Timothy 4:8). Additionally, Paul stated that when Christ comes, His coming will be announced with a "loud command" and a "trumpet call," and believers on earth will be "caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air." (1 Thessalonians 4:16–17). This "Rapture" or "translation" of the saints emphasizes the resurrection of the body and the welcoming of Jesus into His kingdom by His saints. Paul's admonition in 1 Corinthians 15:51–54 fortifies this teaching which promises that "in the twinkling of an eye," our bodies will be "changed," and death is "swallowed up in victory." Paul's writing reminds us that if there is no resurrection, then "our preaching is useless and so is your faith" (1 Corinthians 15:13–14). Though there are debates about when this will occur in relation to the Tribulation, it is clear that Jesus' ultimate destination is His kingdom on the earth.

Fundamental Truth 14, "The Millennial Reign of Christ," lists several verses supporting Jesus' return to reign on the earth for a thousand years before the final judgment. The Assemblies of God has held that a premillennial interpretation of Revelation 20 is the most natural reading of the text, as it does justice to the details of the narrative and best fits with other passages of Scripture regarding the imminent return of Jesus. It also holds that such an interpretation gives space for God to fulfill promises to the people of Israel.

A common messianic expectation of the Kingdom—the premillennial return of Jesus—is throughout Scripture, not only in Revelation 20. Its roots are in the belief in the premillennial return of Jesus. When Jesus ascended to heaven, the angel promised that "this same Jesus... will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven"

(Acts 1:11). Just as His followers saw Him leave, everyone will see Him coming in clouds of glory back to earth (Matthew 24:30; Revelation 1:7). Zechariah prophesied that the Lord will come and His “holy ones with him” (Zechariah 14:5). Paul referred to Christ’s earthly reign when he wrote, “He must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet” (1 Corinthians 15:25). In this kingdom, even the created order will come under His peaceful rule as “the wolf will live with the lamb,” and creation will be in harmony (Isaiah 11:6–7).

Fundamental Truth 14 also affirms that Jesus’ coming includes a future for Israel. Drawing from Paul’s promise that “all Israel will be saved” (Romans 11:26–27), it notes that the reign of Christ will mean the “salvation of national Israel.” In affirming this, it does not mean that Jewish people today do not need Christ as Savior and Messiah. The Assemblies of God has long emphasized evangelism among the Jewish people. This line affirms that Christ’s future messianic kingdom will bring salvation to Jewish people as promised in the Old Testament because they will accept Jesus as Messiah.

While respecting that other Bible-believing traditions may interpret the Millennium in different ways, the Assemblies of God has always held that premillennialism best affirms the core beliefs in the imminent return of Christ, the resurrection of the Church, the fulfillment of biblical promises regarding the messianic kingdom, and all other events leading to a renewed creation (Revelation 21–22). The Church bears witness to the reign of Christ but must never act as if it is the reign of Christ on the earth. Whenever the Church has assumed power in place of Christ, the result has been a historic disaster for the witness of the gospel.

Guidance for Pastors

The doctrines of the Blessed Hope and the millennial reign are essential pillars of our Assemblies of God doctrine. For generations, the Holy Spirit has inspired believers to expect and long for the imminent return of Christ. This belief has motivated reaching the

lost, launching ministries, and sending missionaries to the ends of the earth to reach people for Christ.

Unfortunately, our long history of focusing on the end times includes unhealthy prophetic speculation. End-time controversies and failed predictions have led to exhaustion in some ministers, discouraging them from preaching about eschatology. At times, pastors have avoided the topic altogether rather than face the minefield of divergent eschatological beliefs. There is a great danger that ministers and teachers may be avoiding one of the Assemblies of God's distinctive doctrines altogether. Eschatology is too important to allow the extremes of speculation or outright neglect to determine our message. Because of this, we recommend the following.

Trust in the Bible's promise that Jesus is coming again.

There are many ways to interpret Scripture, but the truth of His coming and the future resurrection is a divine promise from a God who does not lie. Throughout church history, the creeds and doctrines of orthodox Christianity have affirmed this belief. It remains a core belief of the Assemblies of God.

Focus on the hope of Christ's coming.

We call His coming "the Blessed Hope" because of our hope that Christ will raise us from the dead. We have hope that Christ will reverse the injustice and sin of the world when He establishes His kingdom of peace on earth. Our world needs this hope. Our ministers can use our eschatological doctrines to preach hope in our churches.

Avoid misusing the promise of Christ's return.

At times, Christian teachers and ministers have taught about Jesus' return to inspire fear rather than hope. By preaching this hope as a warning for those who will be "left behind," these leaders have used the doctrine of Jesus' return to preach judgment rather than salvation. Paul admonished us to "encourage one another" with this promise (1 Thessalonians 4:18). It is inappropriate to use the doctrine of Christ's return as a way

of controlling behavior by scaring people about missing His return rather than proclaiming it to inspire hope (and allowing that encouragement to motivate). It is appropriate to warn people about the consequences of rejecting Jesus, which is why we preach the doctrine of hell.

Do not allow the details to detract from the main thing.

Prophetic predictions, charts, and debates about the details can be interesting. However, they are often a distraction from the main message. It is important not to let debatable details distract from the important core belief in Christ's coming. The imminent return of Jesus motivates, encourages, and unites us in our mission.

Show charity to other believers in disagreements over eschatology.

The Assemblies of God has defined the boundaries of its eschatology with the formulation of the Statement of Fundamental Truths. However, the Statement of Fundamental Truths does not set the boundaries for being a Christian. We recognize that Christians can disagree on matters that are not essential to salvation, even if it involves the interpretation of Scripture. Eschatology matters, but not all Christians hold the same beliefs about eschatology. God has called all Christians to show charity to one another because of who we are in Christ Jesus despite our disagreements.

Premillennialists, postmillennialists, and amillennialists can all hope in and proclaim the return of Jesus and the resurrection of all believers.

The coming of Christ is our Blessed Hope. As a Fellowship, our responsibility is to "have longed for his appearing" (2 Timothy 4:8) so strongly that we never cease to proclaim the message. After all, the Spirit stirs us to join in the divine chorus of the Bride: "Come, Lord Jesus!" (Revelation 22:20).

Notes

1. *Minutes of the General Council of the Assemblies of God* (April 1914), 1.
2. *Minutes of the General Council of the Assemblies of God* (October 1–7, 1916), 13.
3. A survey of early Pentecostal denominations/fellowships shows that the belief in the premillennial return of Jesus was a widespread and significant belief of early Pentecostalism as a whole.
4. The first was in 1920 when the seventeen truths were reordered to sixteen.
5. *Minutes of the General Council of the Assemblies of God* (August 23–29, 1961), 23.
6. *Minutes of the General Council of the Assemblies of God* (September 9–14, 1917), 17.
7. *Minutes of the General Council of the Assemblies of God* (September 2–9, 1937), 46.
8. *Minutes of the General Council of the Assemblies of God* (August 21–26, 1969), 81–82. It further notes, “We recommend that those ministers who embrace any of the foregoing eschatological errors refrain from preaching or teaching them. Should they persist in emphasizing these doctrines to the point of making them an issue, their standing in the Fellowship will be seriously affected.”
9. Scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV®. Copyright ©1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.® Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. zondervan.com.
The “NIV” and “New International Version” are trademarks registered in the United States Patent and Trademark Office by Biblica, Inc.®

A BIBLICALLY INFORMED RESPONSE TO THE SIN OF RACISM

(Adopted by the General Presbytery in session August 1, 2023)

The Assemblies of God affirms racism is a sin and calls for repentance for those who participate in it and those who fail to address it. In 1989, at the 43rd General Council, the church adopted a resolution on racism that reaffirmed a long-standing position of the church. “The Assemblies of God oppose the sin of racism in any form” and calls “any and all to repentance who have participated in the sin of racism through personal thought or action, or through church and social structures, or through inactivity in addressing racism as individuals or as a church.”

Racism is a supporting combination of assumptions, beliefs, and practices that categorizes groups of people along a spectrum, from superior to inferior, based on physical characteristics (such as color of skin and eyes, and type of hair), ancestry, language, and region of origin. This categorization justifies disdain, hatred, and inequitable treatment against those deemed inferior and social advantages for those deemed superior. All forms of racism, as well as all the various means of justification and rationalization offered by its proponents, fall short and run counter to the biblical teaching regarding human equality before God. Consequently, a biblically informed response recognizes that all expressions of racism are sinful because they demean God’s good creation, undermine human dignity, and violate biblical standards of justice.

Biblical Perspective on Racism

The Bible, the Word of God, is the final arbiter of faith and practice for followers of Jesus. It reveals God’s will and purposes for humans, indeed for all creation. It is completely authoritative, does not fail, and cannot be defeated. The biblical teaching and message, rather than cultural or ideological perspectives, must be determinative of

what the Church believes and how it lives out its beliefs in the world. The Bible presents the unity and diversity of the plan of God for humans, calls for equal standing before Him for all humans, and demands that His justice be conducted within the human realm.

Unity and Diversity in God's Plan

The theology surrounding the creation of the universe and humanity is important in considering the plan of God for both unity and diversity. The Triune God created the first human pair in God's image and likeness (Genesis 1:26–27) as male and female with the responsibilities to populate the earth and to steward other created life forms.

After the Fall into sin, recorded in Genesis 3, the text explains that Adam's wife "would become the mother of all the living" (Genesis 3:20). This intentional comment links all human beings together as one family. The judgment on human sin by the Flood (Genesis 6–9) did not deter God from His plan for unity and diversity. Genesis 10 reveals the great diversity among humans that descended from the sons of Noah.

Similar themes emerge in the New Testament. For example, in his speech in Athens (Acts 17:16–31), Paul announced the one God who made the world and everything in it. In that creation event, "from one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth" (Acts 17:26). Additionally, in Romans 5:12–21, Paul taught that the creation of the one man unites the entirety of humankind and directs them to the one God who is reaching out redemptively to them.

Equal Standing before God

The opposition of the Assemblies of God to racism is based on various biblical teachings, beginning with God's creation of all humans in His image (Genesis 1:27; 5:1–2). Therefore, all racial, ethnic, socioeconomic, biological sex, other biological differences, or cultural distinctions that are used to devalue and diminish the status of humans are sinful at their core.

Unfortunately, because of the reality of the fallen condition, the perspective is not held universally. Many, including some within the Church, reject such equal valuation of all humans, tending to judgments that lead to diminishing the personhood of some individuals and groups. Yet, the Bible clearly teaches, directly and indirectly, the equality of all human beings.

First, Israel, created by the Lord as the people of promise and witness to the world, received from Him the message that they would be a blessing to all (Genesis 12:2–3; 18:16–19). Throughout the Old Testament, God blessed peoples outside of Israel (Hagar in Genesis 16; Egypt in Genesis 41; Rahab in Joshua 6; Ruth in Ruth 4; the widow of Zarephath in 1 Kings 17; Naaman in 2 Kings 5, etc.) due to their connection to Israelites. God offered promises of blessing to other nations in relationship to God’s self (Isaiah 19:25; Jeremiah 48:47).

Second, the Law God gave to Israel was to be applied to everyone, native-born and foreigners. God displayed His acceptance of all humans equally by having the Law applied to everyone, in the same manner (Exodus 12:17–19; Leviticus 17:10–15; Numbers 15:27–31). The ultimate standard by which to measure equal treatment and love was the expression of God’s character, one “who shows no partiality and accepts no bribes. He defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the foreigner residing among you, giving them food and clothing” (Deuteronomy 10:14–22; see also Leviticus 19:33–34; Isaiah 56:6–8). The example of God, coupled with the reality that Israel knew what it was to be considered a foreigner—they had been born as slaves in Egypt—was used to evoke Israel’s love for all people groups.

Third, justice was not to be perverted based on racial, ethnic, or socioeconomic status. God forcefully warned that everyone should be treated equally and fairly when brought for judgment (Exodus 23:3–9; Leviticus 19:15; Deuteronomy 1:15–18; 24:17–18; 27:19). Provision was made during harvests for the sustenance of every person. The landowners were expected to allow all people—including foreigners—to benefit generously from the harvest so that their needs could be met (Deuteronomy 24:19–22).

The message of the New Testament about the equal standing of every person builds upon the themes we see in the Old Testament. This is especially evident in the life and ministry of Christ. Jesus, in His ministry to Israel, recognized people in their own ethnic and cultural groups as recipients of God's blessing (Matthew 8:10–11; Mark 7:24–30; Luke 4:25–27). Jesus affirmed that the house of God “will be called a house of prayer for all nations” (Mark 11:15–17; Isaiah 56:3–7), and His sacrificial death for the whole world was universal in its provision of salvation. The universality of this provision eliminates any excuse for making negative judgments or neglecting the value of others (Matthew 28:19; Mark 16:15; Luke 4:25–27; John 4:1–42). And, at the close of His earthly ministry, Jesus challenged His disciples to carry the gospel witness to the ends of the earth (Matthew 28:18–20; Acts 1:8). His inclusive commands that give no room given for making value distinctions between people and affirms the equality of human standing before God.

Other writings in the New Testament also affirm the equality of human beings. On the Day of Pentecost, the day we celebrate as the founding of the Church, in a miraculous act, people from multiple geographic regions marveled as they heard God's word in their own languages from those who had not known their language (Acts 2:3–12). That same day, Peter preached, “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved” (Acts 2:21). Later, at the house of Cornelius in Caesarea, Peter declared, “God does not show favoritism but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right” (Acts 10:34–35).

The apostle Paul declared that the common need for salvation by all renders distinctions between humans of no service in evaluating the worth and value of persons (Galatians 3:23–29; Colossians 3:11). The artificial and real divisions among humans introduced by sin that led to racism have been rendered powerless by the cross (Ephesians 2:11–22). Paul also used the analogy of the human body to the body of Christ to identify the equality and importance of all its members (1 Corinthians 12:12–27).

In a quintessential moment in the Book of Revelation, as the Spirit carried John to scenes in the heavenlies, he observed great multitudes “from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb” (7:9). Their worship, ascribing glory to God for His great salvation, resounded through the heavenly realm. What a picture of God’s plan for the equality of all people. The gates of the New Jerusalem remain open for the nations who will bring their own “glory and honor” into it (Revelation 21:26), with all human beings united in equal standing before God without sacrificing their unique diversity.

Elements of Biblical Justice

A significant consideration in the Assemblies of God’s opposition to racism is that racism violates the concept of biblical justice. Justice is a biblical theme that is developed from an understanding of the nature of God, who himself is just and righteous (Deuteronomy 10:18; 32:4; Job 37:23; Psalm 9:7; 10:17–18; 33:4–5; Isaiah 5:16; 30:18; Hosea 12:6). As the holy and just Sovereign of the creation, God expects justice (Micah 6:8). Consequently, when we act unjustly, whether with respect to race or any other personal characteristic, we go against the divine nature and order.

A foundational element of biblical justice is the understanding that God intended for human beings to be a community from the beginning (Genesis 1:27). Human beings are bound together by far more commonalities than what may distinguish them from one another. Every member of the community shares the threats and injuries against other members. In the same way, the successes are shared. This demands that each person in the community assume care and responsibilities for all others in the community. It is far too easy to lose the sense of community as populations grow, but biblical justice begins with this understanding.

In biblical justice, there is a place for identifying with the sins of the larger community and calling out in confession for forgiveness (Nehemiah 1:1–11; Daniel 9:1–19). For both Nehemiah and Daniel, there was a release of God’s intervention when they

prayed, confessing the sins of the people. They wanted God to express His forgiveness to the community.

Additionally, biblical justice recognizes that people have individual responsibility before God. For example, both Jeremiah and Ezekiel warned Israel explicitly that they could not merely blame their sin on the larger community (Jeremiah 31:29–30; Ezekiel 18:1–4). The community at large needs to repent, asking for the forgiveness of God for all forms of injustice and the failure to speak against it. However, individuals cannot escape their personal need to do the same.

The Scriptures are clear that racism must not only be addressed on an individual basis, but also corporately, whether in the church or the world. For example, the institutional understanding of the relationship between lender and borrower would allow the lender to charge interest and to receive a pledge for the loan. However, this system could be oppressive, so the Lord provided relief for those who would be harmed by the institution (Exodus 22:25–27). The prophet Jeremiah warns against those who use the system to harm others: “Woe to him who builds his palace by unrighteousness, his upper rooms by injustice, making his own people work for nothing, not paying them for their labor” (Jeremiah 22:13). In the New Testament, James similarly warns those he identifies as rich for failing to honor laborers for their labor (James 5:1–6).

The moral and ethical principles behind these Scriptural commands necessitate equal opportunity not only in lending institutions or compensation but should also apply to other practices and processes. As individuals and as a church we should oppose any practice or process that results in unfair or harmful treatment of individuals because of race.

Biblical justice calls for people to be concerned for those who are oppressed. Isaiah’s message noted the sinful condition of Israel and urged them to repent. As part of the change that repentance would bring them, he noted they should “defend the oppressed. Take up the cause of the fatherless; plead the case of the widow” (Isaiah 1:17). The Psalmist pronounced a blessing on those who “have regard for the weak” (Psalm 41:1).

The writer of Proverbs offered an additional challenge for readers to “speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute. Speak up and judge fairly; defend the rights of the poor and needy” (Proverbs 31:8–9).

The description of biblical justice provided in the foregoing provides the basis of a thorough critique of racism, a critique so penetrating that the only label fitting for such beliefs and actions is sin. Racism goes against God’s nature and order. Racism violates community. Racism is both an individual and corporate attack on justice that Christians must seriously address. Racism undermines the deeply Christian virtue of concern for those who are oppressed.

Summary

Racism, acknowledged or ignored, is part of the present world situation. As believers, we have an opportunity to be salt and light as Spirit-empowered witnesses. The following are suggestions for ministers and members.

First, as noted in the 1989 resolution on racism, “we call any and all to repentance who have participated in the sin of racism through personal thought or action, or through church and social structures, or through inactivity in addressing racism as individuals or as a church.” The Church, collectively and individually, must repent of the sin of racism expressed, in both attitudes and behavior. Racism harms others who bear the image of God. Where the members or churches in the AG community are guilty of racism, repentance and turning away from such is a needful first step.

Second, the Church must acknowledge the image of God in all people and live out teachings about the equality of people in the Bible. God created humanity with diversity and affirming that diversity goes hand in hand with affirming human equality.

Furthermore, the cross of Jesus testifies to and provides for ultimate reconciliation, not only of people with God but also of human to human. Barriers, hatreds, suspicions, unequal treatment, and the like have been healed by the shedding of His blood (Galatians 3:28; Ephesians 2:14). We are new creatures, showing the world what God’s

love looks like and evidencing that love in every circumstance with all people. The Church must live out in actuality what Christ provided for in His atonement and must demonstrate this truth in a fallen and divided world.

Third, the Church needs to model the inclusiveness of the body of Christ. The eradication of racism demands including others in the circles of ministry and leadership. To exclude fellow believers from leadership because of race is incompatible with seeing all humans as God's creations in whom He has placed great value and for whom Christ died. A broad diversity, in all the ways that we are legitimately diverse, must become a part of our thinking and planning for the full expression and plan of God to be revealed.

Finally, the Church must recognize and decry racism in all of its forms. Not every human system is, by definition, racist. However, any human system can limit opportunities for others based on race and prevent them from advancing in society. When those are noted, the Church should not be silent; it should demand change with humility and grace.

Conclusion

In John 17, Jesus prayed for His current and future followers that they would be brought to "complete unity" (John 17:20–23). The Bible begins with God creating humans as one family. Tragically, the Fall has meant that disunity has dominated human interactions. Jesus Christ, through His Church living out the biblical message of unity and empowered by the Holy Spirit, offers the answer for dealing with racism by providing hope for reconciliation and a return to the unity God intends for all people. In 2020, the Executive Presbytery of the General Council of the Assemblies of God issued a statement on racism, writing, "We resolve to participate with the Holy Spirit in actively working against racism at home and abroad, and we seek the reconciliation of people to God and to one another," This remains the heart of the Assemblies of God.

POSITION PAPER ON THE RAPTURE OF THE CHURCH

(Adopted by the General Presbytery in session August 14, 1979)

Under the section “The Blessed Hope” in the Statement of Fundamental Truths of the Assemblies of God, is the following statement:

“The resurrection of those who have fallen asleep in Christ and their translation together with those who are alive and remain unto the coming of the Lord is the imminent and blessed hope of the Church (1 Thessalonians 4:16, 17; Romans 8:23; Titus 2:13; 1 Corinthians 15:51,52).”

Jesus taught that He will return to earth. He was careful to warn His disciples to be constantly prepared for this (Matthew 24:42-51; 25:1-13; Mark 13:37; Luke 12:37).

They understood that the present age will end with His coming (Matthew 24:3). The assurance of His return was one of the truths with which He comforted His followers before His death (John 14:2, 3).

At the time of Christ’s ascension two angels came to the group of watching disciples to repeat the promise that He will return. They declared it would be in the same manner as He went away (Acts 1:11). This clearly means His second coming will be literal, physical, and visible.

The New Testament Epistles refer often to the Second Coming, and the theme of imminence runs through all the passages of Scripture dealing with this subject. Though there would be a period of time between the first and second comings (Luke 19:11), the whole body of teaching concerning the return of the Lord emphasizes that it will happen suddenly without warning; that believers should be in a state of continual readiness (Philippians 4:5; Hebrews 10:37; James 5:8, 9; Revelation 22:10).

Believers in the early days of the Church lived in this state of expectancy (1 Corinthians 1:7; 1 Thessalonians 1:9, 10). Paul's "we" in 1 Corinthians 15:51 and 1Thessalonians 4:17 shows that he maintained the hope he would be alive when Jesus comes back.

A comparison of passages of Scripture relating to the Second Coming shows that some speak of a visible event seen by all mankind and involving the judgment of sinners. Others describe a coming known only to believers and resulting in their deliverance from earth.

The latter is referred to among evangelicals as the Rapture. This word is not in the English Bible, but has been used so widely that one of the definitions of "rapture" in *Webster's Third New International Dictionary Unabridged* is: "Christ's raising up of His true church and its members to a realm above the earth where the whole company will enjoy celestial bliss with its Lord." The word raptured could well be used to translate the expression "caught up" of 1 Thessalonians 4:17. Jesus said His coming will result in one individual being taken from a location while another is left. This indicates a sudden removal of believers from the earth with unbelievers left to face tribulation (Matthew 24:36-42).

Jesus spoke of His return as a time when the nations of the earth shall mourn as they see Him (Matthew 24:30). The apostle Paul spoke of the Lord's return as a time of judgment and wrath upon the wicked (2 Thessalonians 1:7-10).

In 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18, he considered a different aspect of the Second Coming. This brief passage is the most direct and clear teaching on the Rapture in the New Testament. It speaks only of believers, living and dead. Nothing is said about the wicked seeing Christ at this time. Paul described Jesus as coming in the air, but nothing is said about His feet touching the earth, as we are told elsewhere they will at His return (Zechariah 14:4). It is the moment when 1 John 3:2 will be fulfilled, and we shall be like Him.

The same Greek word used in 1 Thessalonians 4:17 for “caught up” is used in Acts 8:39 to describe Philip’s being “caught away” after baptizing the Ethiopian. The latter verse states that the Spirit of the Lord caught Philip away—identifying the source of the power that will remove believers from earth at the Rapture.

In 2 Thessalonians 2:1 Paul called the Rapture “our gathering together unto him.” The Greek word for “gathering” is the same as the one used for “assembling” in Hebrews 10:25, referring to the assembling of Christians for worship. It is a picture of the saints congregating around Christ at His coming for them.

The supernatural removal of godly individuals from earth is not unknown in Scripture. The outstanding event in the life of Enoch was his miraculous disappearance from earth after years of walking with God (Genesis 5:21-24). The author of Hebrews called this experience a translation, bypassing death (Hebrews 11:5).

Although some aspects of Elijah’s translation differed from Enoch’s, it also involved the sudden removal of a believer from the world without experiencing death (2 Kings 2:1-13).

First Corinthians 15:51-54 deals with the same event as 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18. Here also Paul spoke of the changes that will take place in both living and dead believers at the Rapture. He called this a mystery (1 Corinthians 15:51), a truth previously unrevealed but made known to him by the Holy Spirit.

In Philippians 3:21 Paul connected the Lord’s coming to the time when “our vile body” will be changed—another reference to the Rapture.

Passages which pertain to the Rapture describe the coming of the Lord for His people. Passages which refer to the revelation of Christ describe the coming of the Lord with His saints. Colossians 3:4 speaks of believers appearing with Christ at His coming. Jude 14 also foresees the Lord’s return with His people to execute the judgment referred to in many other passages relating to His public appearing.

Since Scripture does not contradict itself, it seems reasonable to conclude that the passages describing Christ's coming for the saints and with the saints indicate two phases of His coming. We believe it is scripturally correct to assume that the intervening period between the two is the time when the world will experience the Great Tribulation, involving the reign of Antichrist and the outpouring of God's wrath on the wicked (Daniel 12:1, 2, 10-13; Matthew 24:15-31; 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12).

Although God's people may endure severe trials before the Lord comes, the Church will be raptured before the period called the Great Tribulation.

In 2 Thessalonians 2 Paul indicated certain things must take place before the Day of the Lord (of which the Great Tribulation is a part) can begin. An individual called the man of sin (Antichrist) will appear. The mystery of iniquity has been at work since Paul's time but is being restrained by the power of the Spirit working through the true Church. Only when the Church is removed from earth by the Rapture can this man come forward publicly.

In 1 Thessalonians 5, following the passage on the Rapture in chapter 4, Paul taught about the Day of the Lord. He warned of the destruction it will bring to the wicked (vv. 2, 3). He was quick to assure Christians that those who abide in Christ will not be overtaken by it (v. 4).

Still speaking of the Day of the Lord Paul wrote: "For God hath not appointed us to wrath, but to obtain salvation by our Lord Jesus Christ" (v. 9). It seems clear that he meant the deliverance of believers from the judgments of the Day of the Lord, including the Great Tribulation.

Christians are told repeatedly in the New Testament to be watchful for the Lord's appearing. Never are they taught to watch for the Great Tribulation or the appearance of Antichrist. To expect that such things must happen before the Rapture destroys the teaching of imminence with which the New Testament is replete.

Believers are told to wait “for his Son from heaven,” not the Great Tribulation (1 Thessalonians 1:10). When the signs of the end of the age are evident, they are to look up and lift up their heads in expectation of their redemption, not the Great Tribulation (Luke 21:28).

The signs of the Lord’s coming will be fulfilled before His public appearing, but they do not have to be fulfilled before the Rapture. Any teaching that certain events must transpire before the Rapture is out of harmony with the doctrine of imminence.

It is consistent with God’s dealings with His people in the Old Testament to believe that the Church will be removed from the world before the Great Tribulation. God did not send the Flood until Noah and his family were safe in the ark. He did not destroy Sodom until Lot was taken out.

The weight of Scripture supports a pre-Tribulation Rapture. Wherever teaching about the Second Coming occurs in the New Testament, imminence is underscored. To interpose other events before the Rapture does violence to such teaching.

While Christians are looking forward to the coming of the Lord, it is well to remind themselves of Paul’s words to Titus: “For the grace of God that bringeth salvation hath appeared to all men, teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly, in this present world; looking for that blessed hope, and the glorious appearing of the great God and our saviour Jesus Christ; who gave himself for us, that he might redeem us from all iniquity, and purify unto himself a peculiar people, zealous of good works” (Titus 2:11-14).

A RESPONSE TO REFORMED THEOLOGY

(Adopted by the General Presbytery in session August 1-3, 2015)

The growing popularity of Reformed theology among younger ministers and ministerial students has caught the attention of the contemporary evangelical movement in the Americas and elsewhere. On the one hand, the love for Scripture and theology and an accompanying passion for Christ and His work is a source of great encouragement. On the other, there is some concern that in hastily embracing Reformed theology, some from more Wesleyan-Arminian backgrounds may not carefully have considered the essential differences between these respective traditions.

There is in fact an enduring philosophical debate over the balance between divine sovereignty and human responsibility that bears on this discussion. At one extreme, God, fate, or some other force is asserted to be the only active agent in the universe, with humans as powerless subjects being acted upon. At the other extreme, it is argued that humanity can do as it wills and does not answer to any higher power, for indeed, there may be none. Christianity rightly rejects both extremes as unbiblical. At the same time, sincere Christians assert differing balances between God's divine control and man's responsibility. Currently, the two main positions in Protestant Christianity are generally labeled Reformed theology and Arminian theology.

The diversity of various Reformed and Arminian groups must also be noted. Both groups encompass charismatics as well as cessationists, and many other expressions of theological difference. For many, the most noticeable and influential expression of Reformed theology is through those often called "Neo-Reformed."

This paper intends to identify in a respectful and irenic spirit the areas of agreement and difference, offering a basis for increased conversation, understanding, and also reasoned disagreement. Many among us have learned much in study and dialogue with

esteemed Reformed teachers and friends whom we appreciate and admire, though we have come to different conclusions on certain aspects of personal salvation.

How It All Started

Reformed theology is often called Calvinism, after John Calvin (1509–1564). This designation is not entirely accurate. Many ideas associated with Reformed thinking find expression in the writings of Augustine more than a thousand years earlier. Calvin was succeeded by Theodore Beza (1519–1605), who significantly restructured Calvin's ideas. After Beza's death, the Synod of Dort (1618–1619) gave Reformed theology its essential and current form. Thus, much of what is called Calvinism, or Reformed theology, actually developed after Calvin died. Furthermore, Calvin's central concept was God's grace. For him, God's sovereignty was primarily expressed in grace rather than in election to salvation and/or damnation. Many historians and theologians, including a number that identify themselves as Reformed, agree that Calvin would not necessarily be a "Calvinist" in full agreement with mainline Reformed theology.

The position most typically held in the Assemblies of God is called Arminianism, after Jacobus Arminius (1560–1609). Arminianism would receive further development by John Wesley, and some may be more familiar with and accepting of the Wesleyan rather than the Arminian label. Arminius had been a student of Beza and was commended by him. In the process of defending Reformed concepts, he ended up disagreeing with Calvin and Beza on the topics of irresistible grace, predestination, and free will. After his death, Arminius's followers further developed his thinking in the Five Articles of the Remonstrants (also called Five Articles of Remonstrance) in 1610.

Reformed theologians responded at length at the Synod of Dort about nine years later with a document called Canons of Dort. This response contained many "articles" and "rejections of errors" for each of the Five Articles of the Remonstrants. A more succinct summary came into use in the early 1900s, often referred to by the TULIP acronym and also labeled the Five Points of Calvinism. Not all Reformed scholars agree that these

Five Points precisely convey the Canons, but they are a useful framework to express the essential differences between the classic Arminian and Reformed positions.

The first Baptists, in seventeenth-century England, were labeled as “General” for their teaching of “general” or unlimited atonement and were broadly speaking Arminian. The “Particular Baptists,” who adhered more to Reformed thought, came into existence somewhat later. John and Charles Wesley became prominent supporters of Arminian theology, bringing it into a dominant position in American theology. By contrast, George Whitefield and Jonathan Edwards held to Reformed thinking. Even so, Wesley and Whitefield were friends and coworkers, their theological differences notwithstanding.

In the American denominational landscape, Presbyterian churches are almost exclusively Reformed, as are denominations with the word “Reformed” in their name. The United Church of Christ is another prominent American denomination that is Reformed in heritage. Methodists, most Baptists (other than “Particular” or “Reformed” Baptists), and charismatic and Pentecostal denominations tend to be Arminian. Many denominations, including Anglicans/Episcopalians, include a range of perspectives. Most Southern Baptists are Arminian, with some holding to the perseverance of the saints (“eternal security”). Others are more Reformed, an increasingly accepted position for many younger Southern Baptist pastors.

Reformed thinkers have produced a greater volume of writing, particularly in theology. This results from what might be called the Reformed “construct.” Arminian, or Wesleyan theology, does not demand a complex philosophical argument, as it seems to more naturally fit a straightforward reading of the Bible and real life. That is, human experience and our understanding of God and Scripture agree to the point that the Arminian stance does not require the creation of a complex theological system to justify an evangelistic appeal to all persons. Reformed thinking, by contrast, starts with a theological approach to what God is like (particularly His sovereignty contrasted with man’s inability) and then constructs a system around that idea.

The “Standard” Theological Distinctives

Arminianism (as derived from the Five Articles of Remonstrance, 1610):

1. The salvation or ultimate condemnation of a person is “conditioned” by or is the result of the God-given faith or unbelief of that person;
2. The divinely provided atonement is sufficient for all persons but is applied only to those who trust in Christ. Thus it is limited to believers, not by God but by the person who trusts or fails to trust;
3. No person can save himself or herself. Without the help of the Holy Spirit, no one can respond to God’s will that all be saved;
4. God’s grace, applied by the Holy Spirit, is the sole source of good and of human salvation, yet this grace may be resisted; and
5. God’s grace in the life of the believer enables resistance of sin and Christ will keep them from falling. Whether one who has experienced this grace can ultimately forsake God “must be more particularly determined.”

Reformed Theology (with commentary):

The most recognizable form of mainline Reformed theology is expressed in the TULIP acronym, as given below:

T - Total Depravity: every person is enslaved by sin and unable to choose God. This does not mean that every person is as evil as they could be or that there is an absolute absence of anything one might call “good,” but that every part of human life has been degraded by sin.

Both Arminian and Reformed thinkers agree on this issue of human inability to save oneself. No mainline system of Arminian or Wesleyan theology believes that persons are of themselves able to enter into right relationship with Him.

U - Unconditional Election: God has chosen from eternity those He will save. This choice is based solely in His mercy rather than any foreseen merit or faith in those chosen. By not choosing the others, God thus also chooses to withhold mercy from some, effectively condemning them by this choice.

Reformed theologians argue that all humans have earned God's wrath (see "Total Depravity") and that the salvation of any person is thus purely a demonstration of God's grace. Arminian theologians believe that God's grace is granted to all persons to enable them to respond in faith. All humans will ultimately bear responsibility not only for their condition prior to this response but also for their acceptance or rejection of this enabling grace.

L - Limited Atonement: the death of Christ paid the price only for the sins of the elect. This limitation does not mean that the atonement of Christ is not sufficient to save all, but it is intended only for the elect.

This is one of the areas of greatest divergence among modern Reformed thinkers. Some assert that the Atonement benefited all but does not provide eternal salvation for all. Others, sometimes labeled "Four Point Calvinists," do not subscribe to this limiting of atonement at all. At Dort, the consensus seems to have been that Christ's death was sufficient for all but only efficacious for some. Arminians argued that the atonement is potentially effective for all with its actual effectiveness based on the individual's choice which is enabled by the Spirit ("prevenient grace"), and God's foreknowledge of this choice. The Synod of Dort drafters argued that the atonement is effective based solely on God's election.

It is important to note that both Arminians and mainline Reformed thinkers agree that the gospel should be preached or offered to all. In Arminian theology, this is because the presentation of the gospel is a crucial element in the working of God's enabling grace. Most Reformed thinkers (other than those designated as "hyper-Calvinist") believe that all should be offered the gospel, as only God knows who the elect are.

I - Irresistible Grace: those whom God has determined to save will inevitably come to saving faith. The work of the Holy Spirit in this regard cannot ultimately be resisted, though there may be resistance by the elect prior to their ultimate response.

This goes along with the belief in Unconditional Election, asserting that there is essentially no human agency in responding to God's call to salvation. The Arminian perspective here is clearly otherwise: grace can indeed be resisted.

P - Perseverance of the Saints: all those who have been chosen by God (the "elect") will continue in faith. Any who "fall away" either were never among the elect or will repent and return to a life of faith.

While the Remonstrants chose not to affirm or dismiss the possibility of ultimately forsaking God, most current Wesleyan or Arminian thinkers agree that just as God does not force persons into relationship with himself, so also He does not force those who change their mind to stay in that relationship.

Arminian thinkers do not believe that the faith of the individual as such saves them. Rather Spirit-enabled faith accepts God's salvation. This is not a works-based salvation, either for entry into ("election") or for maintenance of ("perseverance") the Christian life.

The Assemblies of God does not accept the doctrine of "Eternal Security" and in particular the "once saved, always saved" extension of that teaching. At the same time, "eternal insecurity" (any idea that one must be saved over and over again, or is always at risk of losing their salvation) does not accord with Scripture or with Assemblies of God belief. The believer's salvation is secure in Christ but can be abandoned by willful choice. (See the Assemblies of God position paper on this topic.)

Points of Agreement

As the primary general issue of difference between Reformed and Arminian believers has to do with God's and humans' roles in salvation, this is the focus of this discussion of points of agreement and disagreement. There are other issues that transcend soteriology and they will be explored under "More Recent Developments" below.

It is important to recognize that both Reformed and Arminian groups, especially in their moderate expressions, are fully Christian. Holding a high view of Scripture, both affirm that humankind is in need of salvation, that God alone can provide salvation, and that Christ is God's provision for our need. In fact, members of both groups are usually together in evangelism and discipleship, though differing on certain points of theology.

Points of Disagreement

The primary differences lie in what may easily be construed as the removal of human responsibility (particularly with regard to irresistible grace and election), the logical inference that missions work is not needed or desirable, the hopelessness of reprobation, and the haughtiness of perseverance.

Reformed thinking taken to the extreme has led some to conclude that evangelism may not be necessary since it is entirely a work of God in which humans do not participate. If election is indeed unconditional and grace irresistible, then missional efforts may seem irrelevant. This belief fails to reflect the life and activity of the Early Church as well as Christ's commands to go to the ends of the earth preaching the gospel and making disciples. In addition, if salvation and reprobation are entirely activities of God without human choice, God is dishonored and made to appear unjust, indeed cruel. Why seem to offer a gift that cannot be accepted? It is difficult to see as "good" a supposedly loving God who elects some and passes over, or even deliberately damns, others. Such a view damages the biblical presentation of God as loving, kind, and just.

If all is truly preordained and God's choice is the only active agent in salvation, it might be argued that the sinner should not be blamed for God's decision to reprobate him or her. Ultimate responsibility in such a case seems to lie with God and not the person, for the individual is helpless to choose and should therefore not suffer for what was imposed on them. Removal of ability carries with it removal of responsibility.

A further issue relates to perseverance taken to an extreme, which is sometimes identified as “once saved, always saved.” The Assemblies of God position paper on Eternal Security offers further expansion of the issues and dangers of this extreme.

It must be noted that there are dangers to the extreme expressions of both groups. One extreme form of Arminianism can be labeled Pelagianism, where believers seem essentially to save themselves by the quality of their life and faith. An extreme form of Reformed theology is sometimes called Hyper-Calvinism, where the individual, as noted above, has no involvement in either salvation or reprobation. Neither of these is biblically supportable, or a satisfactory explanation for the realities of life.

It must also be noted that there is no single expression of either Arminian or Reformed theology that is definitive for all who identify as either group. Therefore, caution is to be urged against stereotyping and vilifying either group. As previously noted, there is much in common between believers who are identified as Reformed and those who are Arminian, and there is broad cooperation, particularly within the English-speaking Christian world. This was very evident already in the eighteenth century with the cooperation between the Wesleys (Arminian) and Whitefield (Reformed), and it continues today through such parachurch organizations as the National Association of Evangelicals. We also have broad agreement on the doctrine of Scripture, Trinity, Incarnation, the nature of the Atonement, and other points. We agree more than we disagree.

More Recent Developments (or Branches of the Tree)

While the core difference between Reformed and Arminian thinkers (including the Assemblies of God in the latter) has to do with soteriology, there are other points of divergence that often adhere to Reformed theology and in particular the Neo-Reformed movement. Many of these so-called “Young, Restless, and Reformed” thinkers do not tightly hold to all five aspects of TULIP, with Limited Atonement as the most commonly questioned tenet. Thus, some are identified as 4 or 3.5 point Calvinists. Others among

the Neo-Reformed are more severe in their soteriology than many moderate Calvinists, again highlighting the danger of considering all those identified as Reformed as a homogenous group.

While the Reformed movements in general have been cessationist in pneumatology, rejecting present-day manifestations of the Holy Spirit, there are some in the Neo-Reformed ranks who are open to charismata or speak in tongues themselves.

A fairly consistent issue promoted by Neo-Calvinists is complementarianism, with its rejection in some cases of any ministerial role for women, and in other cases a sharply limited sphere of ministry for women. This is an issue on which the Assemblies of God disagrees, as expressed in our position paper on Women in Ministry.

Conclusion

While there are clear distinctions between those who self-identify as Arminian and as Reformed, there is indeed more that unites than divides us in theology. The extremes of both positions are to be rejected. While individual teaching and preaching of pastors in both camps may be controversial at times, we agree on the imperative of presenting the gospel to the lost. It is when Reformed thinking is extended and taken to the extreme of removing all human response that we must reject it and remain true to the call and example of Christ and His disciples, calling all to Him and genuinely offering salvation to all.

POSITION PAPER ON REVIVAL AND SPIRITUAL RENEWAL

(Adopted by the General Presbytery in session, August 5-6, 2024)

Summary

Revival can mean different things to different people, including times of spiritual renewal in the believer, spiritual awakening in culture, or a heightened sense of the presence of God in the church. Examples in the Bible and church history offer various ways to understand and experience revival. This paper offers guidance on how to prepare for unique times of revival, regardless of how they might look, and offers signs of both healthy and unhealthy revivals in the modern Church.

Definition and Context for Revival

The word revival can encompass a range of definitions. In the narrowest sense, revival pertains to restoring God's people to a holy and prioritized relationship with Him. The term describes a period in history when something special took place, such as the Azusa Street Revival. It can sometimes describe a scheduled spiritual emphasis, like a church revival or camp meeting. People also use the term to characterize a large influx of conversions. In all these definitions, the emphasis is on a time of heightened spiritual awareness and desire, usually in a certain place at a certain time.

In a sense, revival is returning to the spiritual life where we should have been all along, living a holy life with godly priorities and ministering to those around us. Throughout Scripture and history, God has revived His people by calling those who are wavering back to complete devotion. These moments lead to a fresh surge of spiritual life marked by renewed holiness, vitality, commitment, and service when we respond to Him. On a

personal level, Christians experience renewed love for God and others, conviction of personal and corporate sin, and awakening from the slumber of apathy and worldliness. In this sense, revival is returning to a more ideal spiritually devoted state with an increased awareness of God's presence.

For many, revival suggests a season of generalized spiritual renewal in the church or awakening in the community. Some would distinguish the terminology, so that "spiritual renewal" refers to a renewed commitment to God on the part of believers, while increased conversions within the larger community constitutes a "spiritual awakening." Some would restrict revival to a time of unusual awareness of God's presence within the church, which can then lead to spiritual renewal and awakening. Others would treat those terms as synonymous.

There can be a tendency to use the term revival as a catchall word for any unique spiritual or emotional experience or service. To do so diminishes the meaning. At its core, we can understand revival as a time when a group of believers commits again to the holy life, loving community, and divine mission God intends for His people. God calls believers to be fully devoted disciples who enjoy a vibrant spiritual life and engage in reaching the lost. A community of believers who is already healthy and alive does not need revival.

Revival in Scripture

In the Old Testament, there were periods when the people of Israel needed to renew their commitment as God's people. They cried out to God and recaptured His vision for holiness by turning away from false gods, repenting of disobedience, renewing the covenant with God, wholeheartedly seeking Him, and restoring temple worship. When Asa removed false gods from the land and restored the temple, he called everyone together to seek God. The people turned to Him "with all their heart and soul"¹ (2 Chronicles 15:1–15). Hezekiah confessed the sins of his people, purified the temple, destroyed the idols, and reestablished the priestly service and sacrifices (2 Kings 18:1–

8; 2 Chronicles 29–31). Josiah read the Law in the temple and led the people in renewing God’s covenant, which included removing the idols across the land, bringing reform, and celebrating the Passover (2 Kings 22–23; 2 Chronicles 34–35). Josiah turned to the Lord “with all his heart and with all his soul and with all his strength, in accordance with all the Law of Moses” (2 Kings 23:25). In each of these stories, God’s people learned that they were living below God’s standard of faithfulness and holiness and turned their hearts back to God.

The New Testament has a somewhat different paradigm. The ministry of Jesus through the Holy Spirit was itself a calling of the people of Israel back to God. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, Jesus and the disciples preached the reality of the kingdom of God, bringing transformation to people’s lives. The Holy Spirit empowered Jewish believers to reach the lost, including Gentiles, and establish the Church.

In the Gospels, John the Baptist preached repentance and invited people to return to God and prepare their hearts for the Messiah (Luke 3:2–4). Jesus talked about the Spirit’s work in bringing new life, offering people salvation by being born again (John 3:1–15). Jesus also told His disciples that those who followed Him would have “rivers of living water” flowing out of them, symbolizing the Spirit’s continual work of reviving the believer and the community (John 7:37–39).

In the Book of Acts, the Holy Spirit fell on the disciples on the Day of Pentecost, emboldening and empowering the Early Church through Spirit baptism. As a result, around three thousand became followers of Jesus in one day (Acts 2:41). The vibrant spiritual life of the community was marked by a dedication to teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread, and prayer (Acts 2:42), and led to the number growing to five thousand who were saved (4:4), followed by great multitudes (5:14; 6:7; 9:31; 11:21, 24; 12:24; 16:5). In each of these cases, the Holy Spirit empowered believers to experience spiritual renewal which resulted in leading others into the Kingdom.

In the Epistles, Paul told the Ephesian church to be continually “filled with the Spirit” (Ephesians 5:18). As Pentecostals, we believe that the baptism in the Holy Spirit brings

us into a life of spiritual renewal or personal revival. We can build ourselves up by praying in the Spirit and bring encouragement and gifts to others to build them up (1 Corinthians 14:4).

We are also warned about the possibility of needing to be spiritually revived after all this. Paul warned us not to “grieve the Holy Spirit” by living in ways that diminish our spiritual life (Ephesians 4:30). John wrote to the Church, not unbelievers, that if we “confess our sins,” Jesus will forgive us and cleanse us from all that is in the way of us having a right relationship with God (1 John 1:9). James assured us that if we will “draw near to God, he will draw near to us” (James 4:8). Finally, Jesus warned the church in Ephesus that even after they’ve done everything right, they had still lost their first love (Revelation 2:4). Even the New Testament churches could be in a spiritual state that warranted revival.

Historic Revivals

Church history includes a variety of revivals and spiritual awakenings. The first 1,500 years saw small pockets of revival, such as in monastic communities, and large movements that impacted nations.² The Reformation provided one type of revival (though it was not always healthy).

After the Reformation, there were several revivals of prayer and evangelism. The work of Count Zinzendorf and the Moravians produced nonstop prayer for over a hundred years and the sending of 2,400 missionaries. The cultural and spiritual revival of the First Great Awakening affected both sides of the Atlantic under the leadership of John Wesley, George Whitefield, Jonathan Edwards, and others. The Second Great Awakening started in the early 1800s with the Cane Ridge Revival, continued under leaders like Charles Finney, and made evangelism primary.

The modern Pentecostal Movement is the fruit of several revivals at the beginning of the twentieth century. The 1904 Welsh Revival under Evan Roberts saw more than one hundred thousand conversions. The 1906 Mukti Mission Revival in India, led by Pandita

Ramabai, saw an explosion of evangelism among women and a renewal of spiritual gifts. The Azusa Revival (1906–1909), pastored by William J. Seymour, launched the Pentecostal revival globally. In the first two decades, Pentecostals led missions and revivals in Africa (Lucy Farrow, John G. Lake, et al.), Europe (T. B. Barratt, Lewi Pethrus, et al.), Oceania (Smith Wigglesworth, et al.), Asia (A.G. and Lillian Garr, et al.) and South America (Daniel Berg, Gunnar Vingren, R. Edgar Miller, et al.).

The Assemblies of God owes its beginning to revivals and revivalists throughout the United States who decided to cooperate to bring revival to every community and every nation. There are also recognizable revivals that have taken place in modern days. In these historic revivals, God has used many willing and humble hearts to bring transformation and new life to His Church throughout the ages. God seems to stir revival in each generation, calling believers back to their faith and reaching new people with the gospel.

How Do You Prepare for Revival?

Preparing for revival involves a blending of divine and human activity. First, we recognize that revival depends upon the Lord since human beings cannot produce it on their own. Since revival is about moving hearts toward God, we recognize that the Holy Spirit is the prime mover, administrator, and initiator. At the same time, most biblical examples included people who recognized that they were living below God's standard and called out in repentance. God's answer to that cry is a revival of His mercy with His restoring love and power.

A commitment to prayer is one element regularly seen in revivals. Many Christians have relied on the wording of 2 Chronicles 7:143 as a guide to revival. God's people must be willing to humble themselves, pray for God to come near, seek His face (restoring relationship), and turn from their wicked ways. This is very similar to James's admonition that we should submit ourselves to God and humble ourselves (James 4:7–9). We should “come near to God,” and He will draw near to us when we wash

ourselves and renew our commitment to the Lord. This attitude of continual submission to God brings about the personal revival we desire.

Another sometimes missed element is the preparation needed for a community to steward a revival. Are churches ready to accommodate crowds larger than the building's design planned for? Are there available workers on all levels to handle the crowd (greeters, parking attendants, children's workers, altar ministers, etc.)? Have churches planned how to follow up on an influx of new converts and disciple them to Christian maturity?

How Can Leaders Prepare Their Churches for Revival?

Some pastors have tried to cultivate a spiritual environment in order to replicate revivals from other places. This is a mistake. Our priority should not be to create a revival that mimics what is happening elsewhere but to cultivate a healthy spiritual environment where experiencing God becomes normal. Some of the ways churches can foster that environment are as follows.

Healthy Leadership

Are we, as leaders, growing spiritually and allowing others to help carry the burden and avoid burnout? A healthy church must have people who have responded to God's call and have prepared to lead and equip others to minister to people. Leaders must be willing, in preparation for revival, to lead in repentance and humility.

Discipleship

Do we provide consistent opportunities for new converts to grow and mature? Healthy discipleship systems lead people to wholeness by dealing with brokenness and sin.

Spirit Baptism

Do we create spaces for people to encounter the Holy Spirit and be filled with the Holy Spirit? The Holy Spirit is the Reviver who cultivates healthy spirituality in believers.

Moving in the Spirit

Are believers prepared and encouraged to move in the spiritual gifts (e.g., 1 Corinthians 12:4–11)? The Spirit often moves when everyone embraces the opportunity to follow Him through gifts and encouragement to the Body.

Planning and Preparation

Have churches prepared for larger crowds and an influx of converts that come with revival? Have they planned how to accommodate the numbers with the available resources and facilities? Do they have enough volunteers and workers to help steward the revival properly and follow up with new converts for discipleship?

Signs of Healthy Revival

While every church and every believer can experience revival, we recognize that there are special times when God seems to do something unique in particular places. How are we to judge these notable revivals? Here are a few characteristics of healthy revival movements.

Stability

Various unique works of the Spirit visit some revivals. We should pursue the typical, celebrate the unique, and not quench the Spirit (1 Thessalonians 5:19).

Christ-Centered

Though revival should involve good leadership, true revival centers on Jesus, not human personalities.

Awareness of the Presence of God

While God is always present wherever His people gather, there is often a recognition that God's presence is manifested in tangible ways that change people's lives.

Repentance

One consistent characteristic is repentance, as the Spirit of God actively convicts people of sin and compromise in order to draw them back into a relationship with Him.

Alignment with the Word of God

Everything that happens should elevate the authority of God's Word and sound doctrine.

Prayer

Deeper experiences of intercessory prayer usually mark revival, where people seek God in desperation and experience His surprising work (Habakkuk 3:1–2).

Salvations, Water Baptisms, Spirit Baptisms, and Calls to Ministry

Revival should always point the Church back to the unchurched. This should mean people are saved, baptized in water, receive the baptism in the Spirit, and understand their calling into service (Acts 19:1–6).

Signs of Unhealthy Revival

While revivals have many positive effects, there is also the potential for unhealthy activity that works against what God is doing. Too often, human agendas, carnality, and selfishness can get in the way when God desires to move. In addition, we must watch for the enemy's attempts to stop what God is doing. Here are some common warning signs of unhealthy revival.

Excess

Beware of excesses and extremes, such as overemotionalism and sensationalism, which can work to divert people's attention away from God. Revival can get off track when there is an overemphasis on spiritual manifestations, miracles, sensationalism, or "new revelations" about spiritual things that lead to sensationalism.

Manipulation

Be careful of people or leaders who might manipulate the work of the Spirit or people involved for their own purposes (Acts 8:18–23). Such leaders may become controlling and draw attention to themselves and their sensational methods rather than Jesus.

Irreverence

Be careful of those who treat holy things with irreverence or contempt. Such attitudes can "put out the Spirit's fire" and stifle the work God is doing (1 Thessalonians 5:19).

Lack of Accountability

Revival can thrive when there are proper boundaries. However, things get unhealthy when leaders use revival as validation to no longer be accountable.

Self-Interest

Leaders must maintain the fruit of the Spirit and not use the revival's success as a license for self-promotion.

Conclusion

If you are considering attending a revival that has gained some notoriety, watching for these unhealthy characteristics before participating is always important. Similarly, if you are in a place of leadership in a revival service, spiritual discernment in all these areas is critical to stewarding and guarding an authentic work of the Spirit. Remember to stay

humble and seek the Lord; He will guide and protect His work. A leader's job is to perceive from the Spirit what God wants to do and to watch for potential situations that can get things off track.

What we often call revival is simply returning to God's best plan for us. He desires for us to live holy and devout lives, worship in healthy, spiritually vibrant churches where believers are discipled and equipped, and reach the lost through Spirit-empowered evangelism. When we fall short of God's ideal, we must respond to Him in repentance, change our ways, and reprioritize. God will respond to our humility by reviving us. This revived state is where we should remain.

God is still reviving His people; He will pour out His Spirit upon us as we draw near. May God shake us from tolerance of sin and awaken us from our apathy. We humbly echo Isaiah's invitation, "Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down" (Isaiah 64:1).

Notes

1. Scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV®. Copyright ©1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.® Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. zondervan.com.
The "NIV" and "New International Version" are trademarks registered in the United States Patent and Trademark Office by Biblica, Inc.®
2. For a more elaborate demonstration of Charismatic and Pentecostal expressions, see the appendix titled "Pentecostal and Charismatic Timeline" in *The New International Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003).
3. For a longer discussion of the context of 2 Chronicles 7:14 and its application to today, see Martin Selman, *2 Chronicles: An Introduction and Commentary*, in Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries vol. 11 (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1994).

POSITION PAPER ON THE SANCTITY OF HUMAN LIFE: ABORTION AND REPRODUCTIVE ISSUES

(Adopted by the General Presbytery in session August 9-11, 2010)

The Assemblies of God bases its understanding of the nature of human beings on the Bible, which reveals that God created the universe, the world, and all living things (Genesis 1:1,11,21,25). Humans are the highest form of God's creative activity, and He is intentional in both their creation and destiny. " 'Let us make man in our image'... So God created man in his own image,... male and female he created them" (Genesis 1:26,27). "The Lord God formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being" (Genesis 2:7).¹

By making human beings in His own image, God set them above all other forms of life on earth. The term "image of God" signifies that, like their Creator, men and women are personal and spiritual beings, rational and relational. It implies that humans are intended for eternal fellowship with their Creator and requires both sexes for full expression. Though marred when the first human pair fell into sin (Genesis 3; Romans 5:12), the image of God is still intrinsic to human nature (Genesis 9:6), insuring that men and women are capable of response to their Maker. Creation in the divine image is not only an expression of the incalculable value God places upon human life, it also signifies that God has sovereign power over life. He is both giver and sustainer of life; He alone has the power to determine its beginning and ending.²

The nobility of human beings is seen in the divine mandate: "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground" (Genesis 1:28). Superior to all other life forms, humans are to assume the role of responsible custodians of the earth.

Every human life, from conception through death, is therefore to be valued, respected, nurtured, and protected. Every human life is to be lived in obedience to God and His Word. The Bible describes a moral order to which all persons are responsible. At the end of life, all persons will stand before God to give account for their actions. “For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad” (2 Corinthians 5:10).

Therefore, human beings are responsible to bring the light of God’s Word to decisions that bear on the sanctity of life. To this end, the Assemblies of God offers the following biblical perspectives:

The Beginning of Life

Contraception. The Assemblies of God, finding no clear scriptural mandate, does not take an official stand on the appropriateness of contraception within a heterosexual marriage for purposes of regulating the number of children, determining the time of their birth, or safeguarding the health of the mother. These are matters of personal conscience as godly spouses prayerfully covenant with God about the growth of their families. While there are important ethical issues in determining to have a family, the prevention of pregnancy is understood to be qualitatively different from the termination of pregnancy since the sperm has not fertilized the ovum and human life has not yet begun. The biological processes themselves teach us that in God’s creative design not every sperm or ovum is intended to survive and unite. It should be remembered, however, that some methods commonly regarded as contraception, such as the IUD and the morning-after pill, are actually agents that abort, rather than prevent, pregnancy.

The Bible teaches that in the institution of marriage, children are divinely ordered both to fulfill God’s divine purposes for the race and for the repopulation of the earth. The mandate to the first pair was, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and

subdue it” (Genesis 1:28). Throughout Scripture, children are regarded as God’s gift: “Sons are a heritage from the Lord, children a reward from him” (Psalm 127:3). There are certain circumstances where couples may choose not to have children for very good reasons. However, the use of contraception merely to avoid the demands of child rearing ought to be prayerfully examined in terms of the purity of one’s motives and the personal implications of the divine mandate.

In Vitro Fertilization. From a study of the Scriptures, God’s plan for human conception is sexual union between a man and woman in a legal marriage covenant. Children of such a covenant ought to be the result of a joyous and loving sexual relationship in which the husband and wife are responsible for birthing and rearing godly offspring. However, infertile heterosexual couples who have pursued without success all viable treatments may be confronted with a decision to utilize in vitro fertilization.

There are numerous ethical issues to be evaluated in such a process, including the financial costs, the harvesting of sperm and ova, and the nurturing of multiple living human embryos, not all of which likely will be implanted in the uterus. The disposal of unused embryos is an acute ethical issue since they represent the beginning of human life.

Further, there may also be serious danger to the life of the mother in the event that multiple babies survive to full term, which might call for the selective abortion of one or more of the babies.

Given these grave concerns, it is imperative that those who elect this procedure prayerfully seek godly and knowledgeable counsel, and engage medical professionals with compatible ethical standards. We disapprove any procedure that results in the destruction of unimplanted embryos.

Reproductive Cloning. The Assemblies of God believes that reproductive cloning is immoral and a matter of grave concern. In the cloning process, the person is not conceived from the union of the father’s sperm and the mother’s ovum. The genetic

material is drawn from only one person and manipulated in the laboratory, with some risk of contamination, before implantation in the surrogate. There are also grave physical risks for persons who may be cloned. Animal cloning has demonstrated the potential for birth defects and premature aging. Scientists have no way of knowing what type of horrors may be visited upon cloned individuals or upon humankind at large through such a process.

Abortion. The Assemblies of God views the practice of abortion as an evil that has been inflicted upon millions of innocent babies and that will threaten millions more in the years to come. Abortion is a morally unacceptable alternative for birth control, population control, sex selection, and elimination of the physically and mentally handicapped. Certain parts of the world are already experiencing serious population imbalances as a result of the systematic abortion of female babies. The advocacy and practice of so-called partial birth abortion of babies is particularly heinous.

Sexual responsibility. Contemporary demands for abortion often flow from the practice of sexual freedom without corresponding responsibility. The Scriptures speak definitively against premarital and extramarital sexual intercourse and declare such activity to be sinful (Exodus 22:16; Acts 15:20; 1 Corinthians 6:9,13,18; Galatians 5:19). To add abortion as an after-the-fact birth control device is to deepen and compound the sin with resultant guilt and emotional distress. The Assemblies of God affirms the biblical mandate for sexual purity and responsibility that, when obeyed, will obviate and eliminate situations in which abortion might otherwise be contemplated.

The personhood of the unborn. The Scriptures regularly treat the unborn child as a person under the care of God.

1. The Bible recognizes that a woman is with child even in the first stages of pregnancy. When the virgin Mary was chosen to be the mother of Jesus, an angel made this announcement to her: "You will conceive in your womb and bear a son [huios]" (Luke 1:31, NASB). The angel then informed Mary that her cousin Elizabeth was pregnant: "Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child [huios, "son"] in her old age" (Luke 1:36). Scripture makes it clear that in the prenatal phase both Jesus and John the Baptist were recognized as males well

before the time of delivery. Moreover, John before birth is recognized as a “baby” (brephos) (Luke 1:41,44). This translates a Greek word used for children both before and after birth (cf. Acts 7:19). The Bible always recognizes the prenatal phase of life as that of a child and not a mere appendage to the mother’s body to be aborted at will.

Even when pregnancy in Bible times was due to an illicit relationship, the sanctity and value of that life was not questioned. The daughters of Lot willfully became pregnant by incestuous relationships (Genesis 19:36), and Bathsheba gave birth to Solomon though her marriage to King David came about through an adulterous relationship (2 Samuel 11:5). In none of these cases is the life of the unborn considered to be unworthy and requiring an abortion.

2. The Bible recognizes that God is active in the creative process of forming new life. Concerning Leah, the wife of Jacob, Scripture says, “When the Lord saw that Leah was not loved, he opened her womb... Leah became pregnant and gave birth to a son” (Genesis 29:31,32). When Job compared himself to his servants, he asked, “Did not he who made me in the womb make them? Did not the same one form us both within our mothers?” (Job 31:15).

That each person yet unborn has equal value and status before God is indicated in Job’s declaration that God “shows no partiality to princes and does not favor the rich over the poor, for they are all the work of his hands” (Job 34:19).

God spoke through Isaiah: “ ‘This is what the Lord says—he who made you, who formed you in the womb, and who will help you: Do not be afraid, O Jacob, my servant’ ” (Isaiah 44:2). And again, “ ‘This is what the Lord says—your Redeemer, who formed you in the womb: I am the Lord, who has made all things’ ” (v. 24).

David summed it up, “For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother’s womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well. My frame was not hidden from you when I was made in the secret place. When I was woven together in the depths of the earth, your eyes saw my unformed body. All the days ordained for

me were written in your book before one of them came to be” (Psalm 139:13–16).

3. The Bible recognizes that God has plans for the unborn child. Only He knows the potential of this new life. When God called Jeremiah to his prophetic ministry, He indicated the ordination was prenatal when He said: “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations” (Jeremiah 1:5). When Zechariah the priest was ministering at the altar of incense, an angel announced that his wife, Elizabeth, would give birth to a son who should be called John. Then it was revealed that God had definite plans for this child. He was to be a forerunner of Jesus (Luke 1:11–17).
4. The Bible recognizes that God is sovereign in all things, including the quality of life of the unborn child. When people reject God, they may more easily cheapen human life and make it relative. Some are considered worthy to live; others are considered expendable. Who but God knows whether someone destroyed in the Holocaust might not have discovered a cure for cancer. Who but God knows what blessing millions of children killed before birth might have brought to improve the quality of life. When people set themselves up as God to determine if a life is worth living—whether before or after birth—they are usurping the sovereignty of the Creator. There are also things finite humans cannot understand. God’s ways are above human ways. While medical technology may now allow prenatal diagnoses of some medical conditions, it is critical to remember that God’s love is unconditional and above any consideration of physical or mental limitations. Thus, while it may be permissible to pursue prenatal testing so as to better provide for the needs of an unborn child, it is impermissible to use prenatal testing to determine whether or not an unborn child should be allowed to live.

The killing of innocent persons. God’s Word is very explicit concerning the taking of innocent human life. “You shall not murder” (Exodus 20:13) is not only one of the Ten Commandments, but also a moral imperative that recurs throughout Scripture (cf. Matthew 19:18; Romans 13:9).

God inspired Moses to include in the Scriptures a law that brings the sanctity of the lives of unborn children into focus. “If men who are fighting hit a pregnant woman and she gives birth prematurely but there is no serious injury, the offender must be fined whatever the woman’s husband demands and the court allows. But if there is serious injury, you are to take life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot” (Exodus 21:22–24).

It should be noted that the value of the life of both the mother and the child is such that even if there is no critical and lasting harm to either, the responsible party must be fined. However, if either the mother or the premature child is seriously injured or dies, then the severe penalties of the law are to be applied, possibly in this case, those having to do with manslaughter (Exodus 21:13; Numbers 35:22–25). It is clear that the life of the unborn child is precious, and even a non-premeditated injury inflicted on the unborn is a serious crime.

God's attitude toward the killing of innocents is clear. No one is guiltless who takes the life of another, with the possible scriptural exceptions of capital punishment administered by a system of justice (Genesis 9:6; Numbers 35:12), unintended killing in self-defense (Exodus 22:2), or deaths occasioned by duly constituted police and war powers (Romans 13:4,5).

John Calvin expressed the horror of abortion in commenting on Exodus 21:22,23: "The fetus, though enclosed in the womb of his mother, is already a human being, and it is a monstrous crime to rob it of life which it has not yet begun to enjoy. If it seems more horrible to kill a man in his own house than in a field, because a man's house is his place of most secure refuge, it ought surely to be deemed more atrocious to destroy a fetus in the womb before it has come to light."³

Danger to the life of the mother. In the modern era, situations in which pregnancy seriously and imminently threatens the life of the mother are exceedingly rare. If, however, responsible diagnoses confirm that childbirth is likely to result in the death of the mother, historic Christian faith usually has favored the life of the mother above that of the unborn child. Unlike the unborn child, the mother is a mature person with established family and societal relationships and responsibilities.

However, vague threats to the mother's physical or emotional health must not become an excuse to place the child at risk. Any intervention required must have the intent of saving the mother's life, not the prior intent of causing death to the child. As in any

emergency, in such times God's children ought to fervently and earnestly pray for divine intervention. In doing so, the persons involved must prayerfully evaluate the medical diagnoses with the assistance of humane physicians and godly leaders and make, responsibly and with a clear conscience, what will be a very painful decision.

The emotional and spiritual toll. The abortion industry rarely advises pregnant women of the potential impact of abortion on their spiritual and mental health. Desperate women who find themselves in an acutely embarrassing or inconvenient position because of an illicit affair or an unplanned pregnancy, and who are often coerced by selfish lovers and/or embarrassed families, are led to see abortion as a "quick fix." Nothing could be further from the truth. Women are usually unaware of the depression, guilt, and shame that may plague them for a lifetime. While God can and does forgive and heal the broken hearts of repentant sinners who come to Him for forgiveness, the actual deed can never be undone and probably will be remembered with pain and regret.

The woman's right to choose. In recent years, the argument is made that since the woman alone bears the physical consequences of pregnancy, she should always have the right to choose freely an abortion. The laws of many nations now guarantee that "right" within varying durations and circumstances of pregnancy. As this study has shown, however, there is no biblical basis for a pregnant woman to terminate her unborn child. The long historical tradition of orthodox Christianity prohibits abortion. The legality of abortion in modern cultures is rooted in concepts of individual rights, autonomy, and privacy pushed far beyond scriptural teaching. We therefore expressly deny that this supposed legal "right" automatically confers upon the pregnant woman the moral right to abort her unborn child.

Biomedical Research

The Assemblies of God affirms and encourages reverent and responsible scientific research intended to enhance the health and well-being of persons created in the image of God. Christian faith is not to be interpreted in ways that needlessly hinder greater

understanding of the human body and the discovery of cures for and prevention of dreaded diseases and defects. However, there are many temptations to pursue the life sciences for ignoble reasons. Therefore, all biomedical research should be monitored and regulated so as to insure respect for the sanctity of human life and the essential dignity of human beings who are created in the image of God. All researchers are finally answerable to God.

Stem Cell Research. Stem cell research shows great promise for the cure of numerous diseases and should proceed under appropriate ethical guidelines regularly reviewed and revised. There are stem cells, such as adult stem cells, that are readily available for research and whose procurement does not compromise the sanctity of human life. However, the practice of cultivating stem cells from the tissue of aborted fetuses (embryonic stem cells) perpetuates the evil of abortion and should be prohibited. Likewise, the cultivation of stem cells from the unused embryos left with fertility clinics raises serious ethical concerns for human life. Great care must always be exercised in the cultivation of stem cells to insure that the sanctity and dignity of human life are not compromised.

Genetic Intervention. The Assemblies of God is supportive of morally responsible genetic research and therapies. Genetic research conducted with reverence for life appears to have great potential for the health of human beings through the identification of and intervention in the genetic roots of hundreds of diseases. By the same token, used for proud and selfish ends, genetic screening and intervention also have the potential to bring great harm to the entire human race. In addition, the Assemblies of God believes legislation is necessary to prevent intrusive genetic screening and resultant discrimination as well as misguided experimentation and termination of life.

Christian Action:

Whenever abortion and other immoral life-threatening practices present themselves, Christians have an obligation to address these evils in public forums and to seek

legislative and judicial redress. Among the steps Christians should take are the following:

1. Christians should pray earnestly for God's intervention and the wisdom and resolve to resist abortion and questionable biomedical research and experimentation.
2. Christians should provide biblical moral instruction in their homes and all possible public forums. The church, rooted in the eternal truths of God's Word, should seek to lift the standards of society by overcoming evil with good.
3. Christians should actively support candidates who embrace the sanctity of life and should lobby on behalf of legislation to protect the unborn.
4. Christians should work through legislative and governmental agencies to insure appropriate ethical review of all biomedical research and to impose constraints on that which is evil or misguided. While strongly and fervently opposing immoral laws, Christians should exert their influence in peaceable ways consistent with scriptural principles (1 Peter 2:11,12).
5. Christians should counsel those with unwanted pregnancies about alternatives to abortion, such as adoption. They should generously support responsible Christian adoption agencies with their prayers, finances, and time as well as facilitate placement of unwanted babies in loving Christian homes.
6. Christians should compassionately minister to those who suffer remorse and guilt from having had abortions, or participated in abortions and other life-destroying activity or research, reminding them of these words of Jesus: "Whoever comes to me I will never drive away" (John 6:37). Nonviolent Opposition Current laws virtually permit abortion-on-demand, at least in the early trimesters of pregnancy. The Assemblies of God strongly believes such laws are immoral and contravene the law of God. Every legal means should be employed to reverse the effects of these laws and dismantle the immoral industries they spawn. While opposing immoral laws that permit and protect the destruction of life, the Assemblies of God also denounces violent and lawless acts against both the purveyors and the participants in the abortion industry, occasionally carried out by people claiming to be Christians. Conclusion This paper cannot possibly address every single issue or dilemma that may arise. In rare and unusual circumstances where the Bible does not speak directly, affected individuals ought to prayerfully seek godly counsel and the guidance of the Spirit of God. All persons must finally give account to God for any actions that rob others of life, health, or dignity. With these eternal issues in view, the Assemblies of God intends to be both a witness to the truth of Christ and a healing and redemptive agency to assist, through its numerous ministries, those who may be caught in these dilemmas.

Notes:

1. All biblical citations, unless otherwise indicated, are from the New International Version (NIV).

2. The Bible does provide precedents for justly administered death sentences for capital crimes as well as for the exercise of self defense and duly constituted police and war powers (Genesis 9:6; Exodus 22:2; Numbers 35:12; Romans 13:4,5).
3. John Calvin, Commentaries on the Four Last Books of Moses, trans. Charles William Bingham, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1950), 3:41–42.

POSITION PAPER ON THE SANCTITY OF HUMAN LIFE: SUICIDE AND EUTHANSIA

(Adopted by the General Presbytery in session August 9-11, 2010)

The Supreme Court's landmark decision legalizing abortion, *Roe v. Wade*, introduced a sustained and divisive public debate over the value of human life. By lifting protections for the unborn, the Court retreated from a sacred view of life and recognized instead a woman's personal autonomy in the decision to abort her child, the popularly expressed "right to choose." Not unexpectedly, this retreat has extended to end-of-life decisions, with efforts to sanction euthanasia and physician-assisted suicide under the principle of an individual's "right to die." As Francis Schaeffer and C. Everett Koop observed in 1979, "With arbitrary abortion already declared legal, the speed with which the other forms of killing are being accepted must take even their advocates by surprise."¹

Many factors have energized the right-to-die movement, including sincere concerns over excessive reliance on life-sustaining technologies and inadequate pain-relief care for the terminally ill. Its driving force, however, is a mistaken, deceptive, and evil philosophy that devalues suffering people. Consequently, our opposition to the termination of human life must be understood in spiritual terms and must be guided by biblical principles. Specifically, the Church must (1) proclaim humankind's dignity as God's sovereign creation, (2) reassert God's authority over life from conception to death, and (3) affirm meaning and hope for suffering humanity.

Understanding the Issues

We must first clarify the terminology used in discussions of end-of-life ethical issues. Suicide is the act of deliberately and purposefully causing one's own death. Physician-assisted suicide and euthanasia may be differentiated as follows: "Physician-assisted suicide occurs when a physician provides a medical means for death, usually a prescription for a lethal amount of medication that the patient takes on his or her own. In euthanasia, the physician directly and intentionally administers a substance to cause death."² Both are acts of killing, distinguished by the agent (self versus other) who administers the life-ending medication or substance. Euphemistic expressions for physician-assisted suicide, such as assistance-in-dying, are specifically used to mask the true content of these actions and should be rejected. Further, physician-assisted suicide must be distinguished from informed decisions by patients to refuse life-sustaining treatment in ways that compassionately respect individual autonomy.

In His Image

The claim that human life is valuable, even sacred, has its foundation in God's creation of humankind: "So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him" (Genesis 1:27). This truth imparts extraordinary value to every life, independent of gender, race, socioeconomic position, age, or health status. Those who hold to biblical creation must attach great worth to human life and will stand in its defense. Holding to the prevailing materialist model, which explains our existence as the chance outcome of impersonal physical forces, leads to finding the value of life to be relative and incidental.

Our creation in God's image is at the heart of the biblical injunction against murder: "Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for in the image of God has God made man" (Genesis 9:6). By placing His mark upon humankind, God clearly established His own authority over human life and holds accountable those who would usurp it.

The intrinsic value of human beings is confirmed by God's expression of love in the sacrifice of His Son who paid the price for human sin and transgression. God rightly claims ownership of those He has purchased: "Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price" (1 Corinthians 6:19,20).

Not only does God forbid the claims of others against our lives, He also forbids our own claims against our lives. Murder is condemned in the Bible in the severest terms (Genesis 9:6; Deuteronomy 5:17). Suicide, the deliberate killing of one's self, finds no support in the Bible, and the few cases recorded there imply divine displeasure (1 Samuel 31:4; Matthew 27:5).

Advocates of suicide, by whatever means, must deny these standards and reject this valuation of human life. Specifically, they must contend for personal autonomy over one's own existence. The argument is as follows:

"I am my own; the time and means of my dying lie at the heart of my private life; I therefore retain the 'right to die', and no one may take it from me."³

This assertion of personal sovereignty holds the promise of freedom but delivers self-destruction. It resonates with the falsity of Satan's reasoning with Eve: "You will not surely die... For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil" (Genesis 3:4,5). As with any exercise of personal choice outside the parameters of God's law—abortion, euthanasia, drug abuse, homosexual practices, and heterosexual promiscuity—the invariable consequence is physical and spiritual death.

Conversely, the righteous decision to obey God's commands brings true freedom. Within the parameters of His law, the individual may anticipate the joy of His blessing. God confronts each of us with the stark alternatives: "This day I call heaven and earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and

curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live and that you may love the Lord your God, listen to his voice, and hold fast to him” (Deuteronomy 30:19,20).

The Boundaries of Life

God determines the boundaries of life and holds in His hands the two fragile ends of human experience. He is active in the conception of life and the conclusion of life, in birth and in death.

Of his beginning, the Psalmist writes, “For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother’s womb.... My frame was not hidden from you when I was made in the secret place” (Psalm 139:13,15). The womb is the place of God’s creative handiwork. It is there each life is endowed with unique personality, unique physical traits, and a unique spiritual nature. The glimpses we have seen of this work through the eyes of biomedical advance only intensify our awe at God’s techniques. We may be less discerning, on the other hand, of God’s activity in the final moments of death. We naturally shrink from death and view it as an adversary reluctantly yielding, in the end, to its inexorable demand upon us.

Of course, death was not God’s ideal. Death was introduced by rebellion and subsequently spread from one man to the entire race: “Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin... in this way death came to all men, because all sinned” (Romans 5:12). God’s plan is to deliver us from this last enemy. “‘Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?’ The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Corinthians 15:55–57).

For the believer, death is not a final defeat but a transition in which the perishable is exchanged for the imperishable, the temporal for the eternal, the imperfect for the perfect. The believer experiences assurance even when facing death. Job concludes, “You will call and I will answer you; you will long for the creature your hands have made” (Job 14:15). The Psalmist implies the symmetry of God’s activity in his birth and death

when he writes, “All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be” (Psalm 139:16).

If life’s beginning at conception and life’s end at death are in God’s hands, both abortion and suicide, assisted or otherwise, represent violations of His prerogative. Abortion steals from the womb a life yet to be started; suicide hastens to the grave a life yet to be completed.

The argument for suicide also ignores the profound spiritual implications of the transition from life to death. Its proponents and practitioners offer no insights into the spiritual reality beyond the grave. There is no acknowledgment of mortality or final judgment. This apparent naiveté is indicative of the spiritual deception underlying the right-to-die philosophy.

The Meaning of Suffering

Our difficulty in understanding God’s activity in death is matched only by our difficulty understanding His activity in human suffering. From the biblical perspective, however, suffering is potentially purposeful and refining. From the perspective of the proponents of suicide and euthanasia, suffering is meaningless and degrading; it is to be avoided and, if possible, eliminated.

Job offers the prototype of meaningful suffering. He endured pain and disfigurement. “So Satan went out from the presence of the Lord and afflicted Job with painful sores from the soles of his feet to the top of his head” (Job 2:7). His wife’s callous response is curiously contemporary: “Are you still holding on to your integrity? Curse God and die!” (Job 2:9). Rejecting her advice, Job held to his integrity, affirming his ultimate confidence in God, saying, “I know that my Redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God” (Job 19:25,26).

Suffering becomes comprehensible when we look upon the One who “was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering” and who “took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows” (Isaiah 53:3,4). Jesus’ passion assures us of His identity with our suffering and His faithfulness to preserve us through the inevitable tests and trials of life. This is the hope of all who suffer and the only true consolation in the face of unrelenting pain. Christ identifies with suffering humanity, affirms suffering humanity, and heals suffering humanity.

This biblical perspective suggests a life-affirming alternative to suicide for the terminally ill. It acknowledges that fear, helplessness, pain, depression, and isolation are real factors. It also provides, in the person of Christ, a worthy example of compassionate involvement in the suffering of others, which may lessen the very pain and distress that motivate death wishes.

Combining effective medical care with emotional and spiritual help, the hospice movement has demonstrated that few individuals request assisted suicide once their pain and symptoms are addressed. A hospice president has observed, “The public perception is that people are (choosing suicide) every day. But these are people in their own homes, they have the means, they have lots of medication, and they don't choose death.”⁴ Suffering people want their existence and meaning affirmed, not a convenient escape into the alleged nothingness offered by assisted suicide.

A biblical view of suffering also resists the slippery logic of the right-to-die philosophy, a logic which argues that the value of life is in some way or another conditional. For the terminally ill, the value is conditioned upon quality of life. But what of other categories of people that are not healthy, young, and vigorous? Encouraging or assisting the suicide of the terminally ill sets an ominous precedent that opens the door to a more general devaluation of life and the broader practice of euthanasia. Even the American College of Physicians has expressed concern that assisted suicide may lead to actions against the poor, the chronically ill, the demented, the disabled, and the very young.⁵

History justifies this concern. German physicians in the 1920s began to entertain the notion that “there is such a thing as a life not worthy to be lived” and to embrace the practice of euthanasia for the chronically ill, later acquiescing to ever broader categorizations of “unfit” persons.⁶ More recently, the Netherlands has legalized voluntary euthanasia, only to open the door permissively to the practice of involuntary euthanasia, where the elderly and chronically ill may be terminated against their wishes. Already, “death with dignity” laws have gained voter approval or enactment by judicial fiat in certain states in our own land.

At this critical juncture in our own history as a nation, it is imperative that we return to an absolute, timeless standard of human value rooted in biblical truth. We must return to the divine appraisal of the worth and dignity of life, whether born or unborn, young or old, healthy or suffering. We must recognize once again the One in whose image we are made, the One who determines the time of our beginning and the time of our end, and the One who provides meaning and hope to suffering people through the redemptive work of the Cross.

A Christian Response

Having developed a biblical perspective on the practice of suicide, it is important to translate our ethical concerns into corresponding action. To that end, the following suggestions are offered for Christians individually and for the Church corporately toward the objective of eliminating the demand for and practice of assisted suicide:

1. **Seek First His Kingdom.** The battle in our day is not between those for and those against suicide. The real battle is being waged between the kingdom of heaven and the kingdom of this world. Fundamental changes in society are not affected by social or political activism alone. People will be won over to a pro-life perspective through the changing of hearts. Christians must be salt and light; the Church must be the clear expression of Jesus’ ministry to the world. After Jesus’ example, we pray, “Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven” (Matthew 6:10).
2. **Love with Actions.** The strongest statements in favor of the terminally ill and against suicide are made by those who provide spiritual support in hospice facilities, serve as hospital chaplains, render loving care in nursing homes, and otherwise minister to the suffering and dying. As the apostle John urges us, “Let

us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth” (1 John 3:18). Let us affirm our high valuation of suffering people by loving suffering people. Be sensitive to the needs of those with mental health disorders, some of whom may be suicidal and need special care. Visit the friend who has cancer; give time as a volunteer to a nursing home; support a hospice program. Such actions will make the difference for someone who is terminally ill and also set a forceful example of Christian love.

3. Contend for Truth. It is also necessary that we publicly acknowledge biblical truth as it pertains to the critical issues of our day, including assisted suicide. The Church must express in uncompromising terms its core moral values and spiritual convictions as they pertain to abortion and euthanasia. We must hold elected officials accountable for voting records, support pro-life legislation, oppose referendums in favor of assisted suicide, challenge our physicians, and articulate our opinions in public forums.
4. Provide Wise and Sensitive Pastoral Care. The church is not immune to the tragedy of suicide. In its wake, families are devastated, questions about eternal destiny are raised, and the church is left to grapple with a sense of failure. But it is at this point that the gospel of grace can begin to flow in healing power as pastors, family members, friends, and the believing community responds with wisdom and sensitivity.

No one other than our Lord himself can know the depths of depression or illness out of which the decision to end one’s life may have sprung. Suicide entails reasoned and deliberate action. However, one who is clinically depressed or emotionally unbalanced is not normally regarded as fully responsible. Therefore, questions that deal with eternal destiny cannot be decided by the survivors. They must be left in the hands of God who is all knowing, all loving, and forever merciful and just. Recognizing the limits of human knowledge and the gracious nature of the Lord, the church can minister effectively in the midst of brokenness and pain.

NOTES:

1. Francis A. Schaeffer and C. Everett Koop, “Whatever happened to the human race?” in *The Complete Works of Francis A. Schaeffer*, vol. v. (Westchester, IL: Crossway Books, 1984), 337.
2. American College of Physicians Ethics Manual, 4th ed. *Annals of Internal Medicine* (1998), 128:576–594.
3. Nigel M. de S. Cameron, “Autonomy and the ‘Right to Die’ ” in *Dignity and Dying: A Christian Appraisal* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 1996), 23.
4. J. Loconte, “Hospice, Not Hemlock,” *Policy Review* 1998, 44.
5. American College of Physicians Ethics Manual.

6. L. Alexander, “Medical Science Under Dictatorship,” *New England Journal of Medicine* (1949), 241:44.

ALL SCRIPTURE REFERENCES IN THIS PAPER ARE TAKEN FROM THE NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION.

POSITION PAPER ON SPIRITUAL WARFARE AND THE BELIEVER

(Adopted by the General Presbytery in session on July 30, 2019)

Introduction

The Assemblies of God affirms the reality of spiritual warfare, acknowledging that the Christ-follower is engaged in a conflict in the world, with the flesh, and with the devil. Believers do not make this affirmation with any fear, because the apostle John provides the assurances that “the one who is in you is greater than the one who is the world” (1 John 4:4), and “the One who was born of God keeps them safe, and the evil one cannot harm them” (1 John 5:18). The believer, indwelt and empowered by the Holy Spirit, is more than a conqueror (Romans 8:31–39). Such assurance, however, is no license for failing to take seriously the challenges posed by ongoing opposition to the kingdom of God.

Followers of Christ must remember that the “struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms” (Ephesians 6:12). Jesus summarized the divine expectation for humans: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind” and “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 22:37, 39). From the fall into sin (Genesis 3:1–19), the devil has opposed humanity’s fulfillment of God’s purpose. The perversion, misdirection, and disruption of the intended love for God and neighbor is the opening used by the devil to torment humanity and create the warfare that continues to this day.

The triad—world, flesh, and devil—as a description of the arena in which spiritual warfare takes place is firmly rooted in the biblical tradition. The apostle Paul, in Ephesians 2:1–3, identifies these three as the areas of the battle for humans. “As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our flesh and following its desires and thoughts.”

This paper will make use of this threefold lens through which to discuss spiritual warfare and the believer. All believers face this battle, and they do so more than adequately equipped for victory by the powerful indwelling of the Holy Spirit. The result of spiritual warfare, because of the work of the Spirit in and through believers, will be victory.

Spiritual Warfare and the World

The biblical writers understand the concept of the world in several ways. They use it to describe the physical world that God created and decreed that it be filled with His glory (Isaiah 6:3; John 1:9; Acts 17:24). The world is also used to refer to the land on which humans live, and even the humans who are dwelling there (Matthew 4:8; 24:14; Luke 4:5). The world is that which God so loved that He gave His Son to die for its redemption (John 3:16).

However, because of the sinful orientation of the world, it is opposed to God and His people. The world is also described as the domain of Satan (John 12:31; 14:30; 16:11) and as the world system of God-rejectors and their cherished values (John 17:6; James 4:4; 1 John 5:19). Therefore, John warns, “Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, love for the Father is not in them. For everything in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life—comes not from the Father but from the world” (1 John 2:15–16).

The apostle Paul was aware of spiritual warfare and the world. He challenged the Roman Christians to “not conform to the pattern of this world,” because allowing the

world to dominate hinders being able to approve the will of God in each life (Romans 12:2). The world is the total environment in which humans exist, a world which God created and called good, a world which He loves eternally, but a world that has departed from the plan God had for His creation.

The tragic reality of the record of the fall into sin in Genesis 3 is that the very structural orientation of the world has been altered. The ease of gaining food from the ground was lost so that thorns and thistles make it difficult to bring food from the soil. Childbirth is with severe pain, and human relationships are radically damaged (Genesis 3:16–19). The welcoming and nurturing world God created became threatening, with human death as the final indignity. Paul describes this disoriented world as “subject to frustration” and “groaning as in the pains of childbirth” awaiting the ultimate victory of God (Romans 8:20–22).

The structure and systems of the fallen world express themselves in opposition to the believer. Governments, governmental agencies, and societal and cultural norms conspire to attack the faith of the Christ-follower. Laws and policies have sometimes been implemented that conflict with the principles revealed by God as His will for humans. Racism in all its forms, ethnic arrogance, and unbridled nationalism coalesce to negate the truths of the Bible.

The constant pressure of the world to mold believers into its image is seen in the multiple ways the world advertises and tempts them to depart from their faith commitment. The steady stream of pictures, images, and marketing appeals, some based on the basest of human instinct, must be met by a commitment to spiritual warfare against these worldly forces.

Spiritual warfare in the world is also experienced in the pressure exerted on believers by fellow world dwellers who are not battling against the negative tug of the world. Instead, they have given over to the world's forces and place pressure on believers to do likewise. As a warning from biblical history to contemporary Christians, Israel was

challenged repeatedly by God about the danger of allowing the people of the land of Canaan to lead them away from God to the worship of their gods.

In the warfare between the believer and the evil forces in the world, the resources for victory are spiritual, not political. The apostle John gave the primary challenge for engaging the pressures from the fallen world by saying, “Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, love for the Father is not in them” (1 John 2:15). Supreme love for God, the antithesis of loving the world, is the antidote to the challenges of the world. Jude’s call for believers to build themselves up in the most holy faith and pray in the Holy Spirit (Jude 20) allows the Spirit to pray through them “in accordance with the will of God” (Romans 8:26–27). Such prayer is powerful to bring victory in the spiritual battle in the world.

Spiritual Warfare and the Flesh

The New Testament uses flesh (*sarx*) to describe human nature and flesh, and body (*soma*) to depict the human body. Often flesh is used to speak of the weaker aspects of human nature, subject to temptation (Matthew 26:41; 2 Peter 2:18). Paul warns against being enslaved by the desires of the flesh (Ephesians 2:3), and challenges believers not to allow their minds to be set on the flesh (Romans 8:5–7).

The warfare with the flesh is with the fallen nature of humankind, which is now directed away from God and His will toward sinful inclinations and desires. In the fall into sin, Adam and Eve yielded to the temptation to have their eyes opened, be like God, and know good and evil (Genesis 3:5). Instead of continuing to recognize God as supreme and allow Him to be the determinant of what is right and wrong, they chose to exalt themselves and to direct their own lives. Such sin caused them to be no longer turned toward God but to be turned inward on themselves. The decision to remove God from His central place in human existence allowed evil to run unchecked, causing desires and passions to lead humankind away from the plan of God. This war with the fallen nature of humans, resisting what God decrees as right, still rages today.

Paul's identification of the acts of the flesh is a reminder that spiritual warfare against the flesh is crucial for the believer. The list in Galatians 5:19–21, “sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like,” is illustrative of the fallen human nature. The challenge in the warfare against the flesh is to crucify the passions and desires of the flesh and to live by and keep in step with the Spirit (Galatians 5:24–25).

The salvation provided by Christ grants freedom to the believer, but Paul cautions against using that freedom wrongly by indulging the flesh. Such indulgence denies the absolute expectation on the believer to “serve one another humbly in love” (Galatians 5:13). The direction of the unchecked flesh is to broken relationships and personal harm, which are antithetical to the work of the Spirit in the lives of believers. The tragic reality is that the flesh desires that which is against the Spirit, so to succeed in the warfare against the flesh, the believer must “walk by the Spirit” (Galatians 5:16–17).

The apostle Paul clearly states the biblical view of flesh, noting that the sinful passions are at work, leading to death (Romans 7:5). The danger is that even though individuals have become believers, they could refuse to set their minds on the Spirit, choosing instead to yield to the desires of the flesh. Continuing refusal to allow the Spirit to govern their lives results in spiritual death because the flesh is hostile to God (Romans 8:5–8). Warring with the flesh grows out of the recognition that the work of Christ has dealt a mortal blow to the flesh. The believer engages in spiritual warfare against the flesh by choosing to allow the Spirit to lead, guide, and direct all their living. The Spirit provides resurrection life to the believer so that victory in the spiritual battle against the flesh can be realized (Romans 8:9–13).

Victory is gained over the flesh as the Spirit empowers one to overcome the desires of the flesh and its sinful activities. As the believer continues to allow the Holy Spirit to lead and guide them, He increasingly produces Christian character in their lives (Galatians 5:22–23). These fruit of the Spirit—love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness,

faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control—evidence victory in the spiritual warfare with the flesh.

Spiritual Warfare and the Devil

Some may question theologically and practically if spiritual warfare against the devil is real and relevant to their lives and ministries. The consensus of Assemblies of God thought is that an unseen enemy, the devil, exists and is devoted to opposing God and destroying humanity. Immediately after He was anointed with the Holy Spirit to begin His public ministry, Jesus experienced a personal confrontation with the devil (Matthew 4:1–11; Mark 1:12–13; Luke 4:1–13). Later, Peter summarized Jesus' ministry: "He went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil" (Acts 10:38). The devil confronted Jesus repeatedly (Luke 4:13), and Christ's representatives should expect no less. The war was and is real.

The biblical writers evidence belief in the existence of the devil, whom they depict as a personal entity. He is described as a serpent in the confrontation with Adam and Eve in Genesis 3. Capable of knowledge, speech, and persuasion, all indicators of a personal entity, he tempted them, and they fell into sin. When Jesus was tempted by the devil, he conversed with Jesus, even using Scriptures, in the effort to divert Jesus from His mission (Matthew 4:1–11, Mark 1:12–13, Luke 4:1–13).

The devil is the adversary, a liar, and a deceiver. His opposition to God, His plan, and His people is fierce and relentless. However, the devil and the demonic forces allied with him are limited. They are not divine and lack the complete knowledge God expresses, are not able to be present everywhere at the same time, and are subject to God and His people. They do not have guaranteed access to human thoughts. The believer must be aware of their evil intentions and activities but should not fear them.

When God confronted Adam and Eve about their choice to turn away from His ultimate guidance and direction, to fall into sin and introduce sin to the entire human race, He pronounced the ultimate destiny of the devil. "I will put enmity between you and the

woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel” (Genesis 3:15). Revelation 19 and 20 make it clear that the devil and those demonic forces allied with him are destined for destruction.

The conflict between the believer and demonic forces can be understood as a spectrum of demonic influence, ranging in the degree of domination over a person’s life and in the variety of aspects of life where demonic control has taken place. The impact of demonic powers may be slight and almost undetectable. If one repents, forsakes their sin and carnal activities, resists temptation, and calls upon the Spirit to cleanse and deliver, victory and freedom will be obtained. The extreme influence of the demonic could be called “possession” in which a person is controlled by demonic forces who manipulate the individual’s body, mind, and spirit for their destructive purposes. ² This extreme case of demonic control is indicative of continued movement away from, and abandonment of, a personal relationship with Jesus; the believer should gain victory in the spiritual conflict well before this extreme and not be subject to it. While believers will engage in spiritual warfare and will be oppressed, they cannot be possessed by the demonic forces.

Great care must be taken not to confuse emotional and mental illnesses with demonic activity. While the demonic activity may mimic the behavior exhibited in mental illness, to assert that they are the same can bring harm to individuals, preventing them from receiving the medical care needed. The wise counsel of godly doctors, counselors, and psychologists can be of assistance in discerning the actual condition. The powerful and all-wise Holy Spirit provides discernment and wisdom to those who minister to humans facing this severe challenge.

There are those who teach that each instance in the biblical material that references “spirit” or “spirit of” refers to demonic activity. Most often the biblical writers use *spirit* to identify an attitude or a disposition. For example, David spoke of a broken spirit (Psalm 51:17), Solomon of being lowly in spirit (Proverbs 16:19), and Paul wanted to come to Corinth with love and a gentle spirit (1 Corinthians 4:21). It would be better to treat uses

of “spirit” and “spirit of” as designations of attitudes and dispositions, some of which could be sinful unless the context of the passage shows that an independent spirit-being is meant.

The teaching that demonic activity includes authority over geographical areas is based on the incident recorded in Daniel 10. Daniel received a divine messenger who had been delayed by the resistance of the “prince of the Persian kingdom” for twenty-one days (Daniel 10:13). This is a difficult passage to interpret, but even if the prince of the Persian kingdom is a demonic entity, a singular reference is not a solid basis for creating teaching about territorial demonic activity.

The authors of the Gospels detail numerous specific encounters between Jesus and demons. In each case, He was in command and provided the needed deliverance for the human tormented by the demonic forces. It would not be correct to deduce a set formula for encounters with the demonic from the examples of Jesus, because His actions were varied. For instance, He only asked the name of the demons once (Mark 5:9; Luke 8:30). In that same encounter, He allowed the demons to choose where He would send them—into the pigs (Matthew 8:31; Mark 5:11–12; Luke 8:32). There are other instances in which He did not permit the demons to speak (Mark 1:34; Luke 4:35, 41). The Gospel writers frequently noted that He healed and delivered from demons (e.g., Matthew 4:34), but He did not identify every human malady with demonic possession.

There are some positive lessons from the accounts of Jesus’ victorious encounters with demons. He identified the Holy Spirit as the source of His casting out demons (Matthew 12:28; the “finger of God” in Luke 11:20), indicating the arrival of the kingdom of God. After delivering the young boy as He returned from the Mount of Transfiguration, He pointed to the necessity of faith and prayer (Matthew 17:20–21; Mark 9:29). In every case, Jesus’ voice was the command that drove demonic forces out of humans.

James provides a powerful means by which the believer can defeat the devil in spiritual warfare: “Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you”

(James 4:7). As believers recognize their full dependence on the power of God and that the devil cannot stand before that power, they can refuse to allow the devil any place in their lives. Peter summarizes warfare with the devil by saying, “Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know the family of believers throughout the world is undergoing the same kind of sufferings” (1 Peter 5:8–9).

Pastoral Implications

Spiritual warfare in the world, with the flesh, and with the devil is a reality for Christ-followers. Pastoral leadership has the privilege of preparing congregational members for, and encouraging them in, this battle. The Pentecostal reality of Spirit-filled and enabled living is crucial for overcoming the attacks of the world, the flesh, and the devil. Leading the congregation into this Spirit-dependent living is vital. The ongoing growth of the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22–23) and the allowance for the expression of the gifts of the Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:4–11) in the lives of believers are of paramount importance. Encouraging Christ-followers to allow the Holy Spirit to pray and praise through them in a heavenly language opens the will and purposes of God to strengthen each for the challenges faced in spiritual warfare (Romans 8:26–27; Jude 20).

In the letter to the Ephesians, Paul challenged believers in spiritual warfare “to put on the full armor of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil’s schemes” (Ephesians 6:11). Spiritual warfare is not against humans; instead, it is with spiritual forces of evil. Standing against such is possible because of the armor provided by God— “the belt of truth... the breastplate of righteousness... feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace... the shield of faith... the helmet of salvation... the sword of the Spirit” (Ephesians 6:14–17). Paul concluded the presentation of the resources provided the believer for spiritual warfare with a reminder of the power of prayer in the Spirit (Ephesians 6:18).

There are some in congregations with emotional and mental challenges which might be helped by medical and counseling professionals. In some instances, the medical profession could be of more assistance than a deliverance ministry. Making use of professional help would not be instead of fervent prayer and intercession. God has the power to heal all of humanity's illnesses. Great care and dependence on the guidance of the Holy Spirit are needed to determine the best path toward wholeness and healing.

Congregations have the privilege of not only being strengthened to fight personally but also to engage spiritual warfare in a corporate act of intercession. The battle with the world often must be carried on at the systems or structural level. Evil expresses itself through corporate practices, governmental decisions, and cultural traditions. The body of Christ can see the victory of God through intercessory prayer and actions as needed.

The apostle Paul provided the assurance needed for all believers as they engage in spiritual warfare. "What, then, shall we say in response to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?... in all things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us" (Romans 8:31–32, 37). Peter, as he begins his second epistle, provided this great assurance: "His divine power has given us everything we need for a godly life through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness" (2 Peter 1:3).

Notes

1. All biblical citations are from the New International Version (2011) (NIV) unless otherwise identified.
2. With demon possession, the power of Satan takes control of the center of an individual's personality. In such lives, demons can manifest themselves through temporary changes in personality, speech, bizarre physical behavior, physical and mental affliction, and self-destructive tendencies.

POSITION PAPER ON TRANSGENDERISM, TRANSSEXUALITY, AND GENDER IDENTITY

(Adopted by the General Presbytery in Session August 5-7, 2017)

According to Scripture, when God created human beings, He created them “male and female” and blessed their marital union (Genesis 1:26–28; 2:20–25). Later authors of Scripture interpreted this twofold act of creation and blessing to entail moral norms such as the mutual cultivation of intimacy between husband and wife and the prohibition of sexual immorality and divorce (c.f., Matthew 19:4–9; Mark 10:5–12; 1 Corinthians 7:12–20; Hebrews 13:4). The prophet Moses, Jesus the Messiah, and the apostle Paul are united in common witness to the goodness of humanity’s biological complementarity and the moral norms that should govern male-female sexual behavior.

Recent decades have witnessed the steady erosion of biblical moral norms governing sexual behavior. As these norms regarding, among others, nonmarital sexual intercourse, homosexual activity, marital infidelity, procreation, and divorce have given way in the broader culture to more permissive understandings, new, more fundamental challenges have emerged to the very notion of biological complementarianism itself. This “transgender moment,” as it has been called—in which a person can select a gender identity at variance with their biological sex—requires a biblical and theological appraisal.

How, then, should the Assemblies of God respond to transgender persons?

In this position paper, we set out to answer that question by first understanding the experience of transgender persons in social-scientific terms. Then, we turn to a theological evaluation of the matter in light of what the Bible teaches about the sanctity of the body and about transgender behavior. Finally, we offer guidelines for the church’s

ministry to people who struggle with gender identity, a struggle that is difficult for the vast majority of persons—Christian or otherwise—to understand.

A Social-Scientific Analysis of Transgenderism

Gender Identity versus Sexual Identity. “Transgender” is represented by the “T” in the popular initialism LGBTQIA+ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer or Questioning, Intersex, Asexual, with the “+” standing in for any other designation). While the demographics are difficult to come by, transgenderism may be the smallest group within the larger LGBTQIA community. For comparison, homosexuality may represent 1–2 percent of the US population (with men outnumbering women), bisexuality 2–4 percent (with women outnumbering men), intersex 1–4 percent, asexuality 1 percent, and transgenderism at 0.6 percent based on a broad definition of the term (though some researchers have it even lower than 0.1 percent).¹

“Transgender” can refer to any individual whose gender identity (culturally defined as an internal sense of gender) differs in some way from their birth or biological sex. The term “transsexual” is typically used for those who seek medical assistance to change their biological or birth sex. A significant step in the modern conception of transgenderism was the separation of gender as a social construct from biological sex as a given at birth. To be born female no longer meant someone was limited as a woman according to the expectations of society. As this understanding developed, its fluidity offered significant explanatory power for the transgender experience of gender incongruence (experiencing an internal sense of gender that is at odds with one’s birth or biological sex).

Even though by definition transgenderism is not the same thing as homosexuality, there is enough overlap between the two that some regard transgenderism as homosexuality by another name. For example, if a transgender individual is biologically male but perceives his identity to be female, and is sexually attracted to men, it would be considered a homosexual attraction for those who see the individual as male. On the

other hand, that same person might count it as heterosexual because of the identification as female. But what would be the determination if the transgender individual had undergone a sex reassignment surgery? Our culture does not agree on the answer.

Regardless of their inclusion within the LGBTQIA+ initialism, shared political benefits, and the overlap between the transgender and gay communities, transgenderism remains culturally distinguishable from homosexuality, as the former deals with gender identity (identifying as male, female, or other) while the latter deals with sexual orientation (sexual attraction to the same sex). While the overlap between the transgender and homosexual community is recognized, it is important to remember that those who identify as transgender are not necessarily homosexual.

Today “transgender” is typically used as the umbrella term for the myriad of ways in which individuals can experience and express incongruence between their birth sex and their gender identity. “Transgender” has been applied to individuals as varied as children struggling with their sense of gender, drag queens, and intersex individuals born with both male and female traits that do not allow easy identification (though for the reason that they were born without a clear birth sex, many intersex individuals will not accept the trans label). Cross-gender behavior may also cover a variety of expressions ranging from secretly cross-dressing to undergoing sex reassignment surgery. There is no one-size-fits-all explanation of transgenderism, nor a one-size-fits-all response to the pain experienced by transgender individuals.

Understood as a Medical Condition. A common assumption among some doctors is that there is a biological basis for transgenderism, but years of research and debate within the medical community regarding the cause of transgenderism have been inconclusive. Even if a biological basis for transgenderism could be proven, is that basis determinative or does it only provide a disposition for transgenderism that must also take environmental and cultural factors into account? Some recent studies have questioned whether any biological basis can be found for gender as something other

than birth sex. Those studies do not suggest that those who experience gender incongruence with their birth sex have chosen that experience, but that factors that seem out of their control in regards to their sense of gender have a psychological and cultural cause along with, or rather than, a biological cause.

Today mental health professionals work to help individuals with their experience of gender incongruence rather than the gender incongruence itself. The third edition of the American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM) first defined "Gender Identity Disorder" as a mental disorder in which someone identified with a gender other than one's birth sex. By the fifth edition of the DSM (2013), "Gender Identity Disorder" was replaced with "Gender Dysphoria" to remove the stigma associated with the word "disorder." The diagnosis has shifted from gender incongruence as a mental disorder signified by behavior to the discomfort or dysphoria experienced by an individual due to their gender incongruence. Under the new classification, not all people who would be identified as transgender would also be diagnosed with gender dysphoria, such as someone who no longer reported a sense of dysphoria after a sex reassignment surgery. Considering that 41 percent of individuals who experience gender dysphoria will attempt suicide, this tendency in the mental health field to focus on distress is understandable.²

There are four possible outcomes for those seeking treatment for gender dysphoria: (1) gender dysphoria might remain unresolved, (2) it might be resolved in favor of birth sex, (3) it might be managed with intermittent cross-gender behavior (e.g., cross-dressing), or (4) it might be resolved by choosing to fully adopt their preferred gender over their birth sex (including medical options such as sex reassignment surgery).

While some studies of transgender individuals have shown a short-term psychological benefit to sex reassignment surgery, other studies have also shown that the rates of suicide are still abnormally high among those who have fully transitioned. Some blame the cause of continued psychological distress after surgery on the lack of full acceptance by society, but that theory alone may not account for the high number of

suicides. Treatment that emphasizes a resolution toward preferred gender could mask problems that resolution alone does not solve. A few mental health professionals have questioned the morality of sex reassignment surgery, especially in light of the lack of hard evidence for a biological cause to transgenderism. An invasive surgical response, involving the disposal of healthy organs, may not be the ethical solution to what may be a deep-rooted psychological condition. In that case, it may not solve the root problem in the long run. Because of these concerns, some hospitals no longer permit sex reassignment surgeries.

In children diagnosed with gender dysphoria, the treatment options include a wait-and-see approach, encouraging the child to identify as their birth sex, or encouraging the child to identify in accordance with their gender incongruence. This last option may even include providing hormone blockers to delay puberty so that children will have time to enter adolescence before they make the choice of how to resolve their gender incongruence. This last treatment seems irresponsible considering the potential risks of sterility, the impact on bone mass and brain development, and that the majority of children diagnosed with gender dysphoria will not carry that diagnosis into adulthood.

Gender dysphoria does occur throughout the transgender community and brings with it some negative and dangerous behaviors, from body harming activities such as cutting to suicide. To say that it is a psychological condition in need of treatment does not take away from the spiritual dimension of gender dysphoria specifically, or transgenderism in general. This spiritual dimension also calls for help. According to Dr. Mark Yarhouse, an evangelical psychologist, transgender individuals should not be seen as soldiers in a culture war, but rather as its victims. The question that needs to be answered is how the church should respond to the issue of transgenderism and to transgender individuals in a way that is fully in line with God's redemptive plan for all.

A Christian Response

In light of the body. Beyond certain behaviors that can be interpreted as reflections of transgenderism, Scripture does not specifically address a contemporary understanding of gender as a socially constructed concept different from biological sex. A Christian response to transgenderism is better established through a biblical theology of the body rather than by combing the Scriptures for applicable proof texts in light of specific behaviors.

At the heart of the transgender experience is gender incongruence, an internal sense of gender at odds with one's birth sex. A common way to deal with that incongruence is to show a preference for one's internal sense of gender as representing one's true self over against one's body. Some within the church have argued in support of a range of expressions of transgenderism by saying that one's inner self, identified with the soul, should determine gender rather than the body. In other words, if someone with male genitalia has an internal sense of being female, then he should be properly understood as she. The body does not have the vote.

A biblical theology of the body, however, argues for the essentiality of the body in determining our identity. The scriptural witness of the sanctity of the body remains regardless of the shifting cultural understanding of gender. Scripture does not speak about transgenderism as it is understood today, but it still speaks to the transgender community and the church. A biblical theology of the body can aid the church in developing a response to the issue of transgenderism that respects God's intention for and redemption of human beings.

A biblical theology of the body necessarily involves three central Christian doctrines—the creation of humanity, the incarnation of Jesus, and the resurrection of believers. Through these doctrines the scriptural witness about the human body can be fully appreciated. These doctrines also serve as a background for understanding passages which apply more directly to behaviors related to transgenderism.

Genesis 1:26–31 is the record of God creating, blessing, and commanding humanity as male and female. Humans are created in the “image of God” as male and female. The “image of God” refers at least to the role of humanity over creation as representatives of the authority of God. God’s blessing of humanity, like God’s other blessings throughout Genesis, pertains to continuance, which in this case, means procreation. If humanity is meant to represent God over the earth, then human beings must fill the earth. Hence, God’s first command to humanity is to be fruitful and multiply. Creation as male and female makes human fruitfulness, and by extension the calling to act as God’s image, possible.

In all of this, the bodily aspect of maleness and femaleness is paramount. To be female and male makes possible the ability to reproduce sexually. Even after the fall of humanity, reproductive ability remains credited to God who created humans as male and female (Genesis 4:1), as does humanity’s ongoing status as creations in God’s image (Genesis 5:1–3; 9:6). God’s creation of humanity as male and female is, at least, because God intends for humans to reproduce.

At most, God’s intention for humanity to be female and male may be related to human incompleteness apart from a sexually differentiated other. Genesis 2:18–25 describes the initial relationship between woman and man with God’s recognition that “it is not good for the man to be alone.” The “building” of woman from man leads man to recognize himself as male just as he recognizes her as female. Until verse 23, the Hebrew for “man” is *adam*, related to the Hebrew word for ground, *adamah*. “Man” is formed from the dust of the earth in Genesis 2:7 and is named in relationship to the ground. After the creation of woman, *ishshah*, man is identified for the first time as “*ish*,” for woman, *ishshah*, came out of man, *ish*. Man as male remains incomplete without his biologically sexual other, without whom neither she nor he could be known or know themselves as female and male. As many theologians since at least Karl Barth have noted, God may intend humanity to be in His image as male and female together because it makes humans necessarily relational beings who, not finding completeness apart from each other, also realize their incompleteness apart from God. Our gendered

bodies serve as testimonies to our responsibility to live as God's image and to our incompleteness in ourselves individually.

The biblical recognition of two distinct human sexes, female and male, from the creation of humanity as male and female in Genesis 1:26–27, is affirmed by Jesus in Matthew 19:4 and Mark 10:6. The Old Testament also narrates the role that sin plays in corrupting human nature, beginning in Genesis 3. The New Testament affirms this corruption of humanity even to the extent of affecting sexual desires (Romans 1:18–32). There is not one aspect of being human or the human experience that is unaffected by fallen-ness, including, but not limited to, biology, reason, spirituality, self-identity, and the relations between all aspects of humanity. The relationship with the Creator and the rest of creation, including other human beings, is also affected by human fallen-ness. Salvation, found in Christ, includes a healing of the effects of fallen-ness so that no aspect of being human or the human experience should be unaffected by God's redemption through the incarnate Lord.

The human body receives no greater honor than in the doctrine of the Incarnation. That the Word of God would become flesh and dwell among humanity (John 1:14) shows that the human body as created by God can embody the presence of God. Jesus was born, lived, and died a fully human life as God in the flesh, yet without sin. His resurrection was a bodily resurrection as a human being, the firstfruits of all those whom God will raise (1 Corinthians 15:20–23).

Jesus lived with all the experience of a human body and all the differentiation a human body possesses in comparison with other human bodies. Jesus grew to a certain height with specific features that made Him identifiable to all who knew Him. He was born with an ancestry that marked Him as Jewish within Israel and the greater Roman world. He had a sexual makeup that identified Him as male. Even the scars on His body, which helped identify Him as the Risen Lord to His followers, remain part of His bodily life after the Resurrection. Jesus experienced all the limitations of a human body, including sleep, hunger, sweat, and pain. While not everything about the body of Jesus is

described (His height, weight, complexion, hair color, eye color, etc.), what is described reveals Jesus as a fully embodied human with all that goes with a body, from a genetic heritage to daily hunger.

Jesus remained a fully embodied human being after His resurrection. Jesus is the only concrete example of a final human resurrection. If Jesus rose from the dead with a body that was identifiable, not only as human but as Jesus still bearing the scars of the Crucifixion, then all bodies will be redeemed in the resurrection and still be identifiable. The body then will be continuous with the body now, though made different by the resurrecting power of God.

The full extent of the redemption of fallen humanity, and thus true human identity, is understood in light of the resurrection of the body. The most significant teachings on the resurrection of the body in the New Testament come from the resurrection accounts of the Gospels and 1 Corinthians 15. Both sources highlight the continuity and discontinuity between human bodies before and after the resurrection, but embodiment itself is assured. In Luke 24 and John 20, Jesus must prove that His resurrection is neither the resuscitation of a corpse nor the apparition of a spirit. Jesus shows He is not an apparition by offering His body to be touched by the disciples and by eating in front of them; His scars prove that He is the same Jesus who was crucified (Luke 24:37–43, John 20:20–27). Proof of His resurrection depends on His continued embodiment, which in turn becomes the guarantee of our physical resurrection. Jesus is no less incarnate as the Risen Lord.

According to many commentators, Paul explains the doctrine of resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15 because some within the Corinthian church were denigrating the body to the point of denying the truth or necessity of the Resurrection. He defends the teaching in light of the proven resurrection of Jesus (vv.1–11), which guarantees the future resurrection of humans (vv.12–34). In the last half of the chapter, Paul describes the resurrection through comparison with the body's present expression. Resurrected bodies will be continuous with present bodies like a plant is continuous with the seed

from which it springs. While the former bodies are perishable, weak, and “dusty,” the resurrected bodies will be imperishable, powerful, and “spiritual.” It is the “flesh and blood” of the current bodies that cannot inherit the kingdom of God, but God will grant glorified bodies that can. The difference between the natural and glorified bodies is a difference of mortality, not a difference of embodiment.

The doctrine of the resurrection establishes the continuation of the human body as the intention of God in the salvation of humanity. The God who created humans as whole beings (comprised of body and an immaterial nature) intends for life in the age to come to be as whole beings. Redemption is not complete until bodies are raised to life. While this does not mean that there is no experience of God between physical death and resurrection (2 Corinthians 5:6–8), it does mean that wholeness is not expressed without bodies. The Bible presents human beings as whole unities, as bodies of dust initially enlivened by the breath of God (Genesis 2:7) who will one day become bodies of glory vitalized by the Spirit of God. No account of heaven that makes the final resurrection anticlimactic can be considered a Christian view of the afterlife.

True human identity is what is being realized in relationship with Christ, body and an immaterial nature, which will culminate in the Resurrection. No account of humanity that asserts the interior life as the true self over against the body is a biblical understanding of humanity. The true self is a whole being, redeemed and restored through the work of Christ to a glorious resurrection that reflects God’s final intention for embodied humanity. That resurrection involves the whole body, because gendered bodies were part of God’s good creation and not a result of the Fall, because humanness will not be less as redeemed than it was as fallen, and because the assumption from the Gospels’ accounts is that Jesus was still recognized as a whole being after His resurrection.

One biblical teaching of Jesus that may call this into question is found in Matthew 22:23–32 and Mark 12:18–27. The Sadducees had challenged the belief in the resurrection by offering Jesus a case concerning one woman who, in accordance with the law of Moses, had married seven brothers in turn but outlived them all without

producing children. Their question as to whose wife she would be in the resurrection was intended to show the problems introduced by a literal resurrection for their belief in the eternal validity of the Law. Jesus responded by challenging their knowledge of both the Law and the power of God. He teaches that in the resurrection humans will be as the angels in neither marrying nor giving away someone in marriage (Matthew 22:30; Mark 12:25). Some have taken this to mean that resurrected bodies will be like angelic bodies, with the assumption that if angels are not gendered, then neither will we be gendered in the resurrection. However, Jesus is only saying that the institution of marriage will not exist after the resurrection any more than it exists among the angels. The purpose served by marriage in this age will not be needed in the age to come. This passage should not be taken to mean that the body will be lacking in the resurrection in comparison to the present body.

The promise of the resurrection serves as a focus for a developing identity in Christ, for completed humanity in Christ will be fulfilled at the resurrection of the body. It is the resurrection even more than the doctrine of creation that highlights the sanctity of the body, as it is clear that God's final intention for humans is existence as embodied beings. This theology of the body as essential to our true self cannot be denied when dealing with gender incongruence no less than the pain of gender incongruence can be ignored when ministering to those who suffer from gender dysphoria. The desire on the part of many who suffer gender incongruence to find resolution by changing their body is a sign of the importance of the body to human identity.

True sympathy must be extended to those in pain even if a solution that so completely prioritizes the interior over the exterior cannot be embraced because of belief in the sanctity of the body and the wholeness of human beings. This does not mean that those who struggle with gender incongruence are sinning, nor does it mean that attempts to resolve the incongruence against the body should be regarded as intentional rebellion against God rather than as a fight for survival. A community in which 41 percent of its members attempt suicide is a community of people in pain. While the Bible does not directly address transgender identity or a transgender lifestyle as such, it does

recognize that individuals may make choices that are purposely at variance with their birth sex. No one has a full understanding of what causes gender incongruence, but certain behaviors which reflect a transgender identity are morally inappropriate in accordance with a Christian theology of the body. This is not to say that there should be an entirely rigid and unreasonable standard for expressing a particular gender based on cultural stereotypes. Not all behaviors carry the same meaning regardless of culture or context. However, the absence of any standards or boundaries, and the refusal to recognize our collective bodily human existence as male and female as the intentions of our Creator, leads to a confusion that negatively affects our culture as a whole.

In light of behavior. The most commonly cited verse on cross-gender behavior is Deuteronomy 22:5, “A woman must not wear men’s clothing, nor a man wear women’s clothing, for the Lord your God detests anyone who does this” (NIV). This verse is found in a section of Deuteronomy 22 which focuses on the respect for both human and animal life (verses 1–8). Verses 9–11 remind people not to mix what should remain distinct while the last half of the chapter covers regulations for protecting the integrity of marriage and individuals wronged by others sexually. Read together, these laws are concerned with the protection of life both within nature and within marriage. Life and sex go hand in hand, and protection of the former calls for protection of the latter. If, as many commentators believe, Deuteronomy 12 through 26 should be understood as ordered in light of the Ten Commandments, then Deuteronomy 22 contains laws pertaining both to the sixth and seventh commandments, prohibiting murder and adultery.

The judgment on cross-dressing in verse 5 is that it is a “detestable thing” (*toebah*) or an abomination to God. The Hebrew *toebah* is used throughout the Old Testament for ritual and ethical activities that God detests including idolatry (Deuteronomy 7:25) and sexual immorality (Leviticus 18:29), but also for other violations of proper order including unethical business practices (Deuteronomy 25:13–16) and troublemaking (Proverbs 6:16–19). Cross-dressing in this verse has been interpreted to be a reference to homosexuality (cross-dressing understood as a kind of sexual role-play) or a reference

to transvestite behavior found in the pagan worship of other Ancient Near Eastern cultures, as in the cult of Ishtar or Canaanite fertility cults. It may be in that context that any behavior which dissolved distinctions between the sexes offered support for pagan versions of prostitution or goddess worship. However, even if prostitution or goddess worship is no longer the context, the text does not support behavior which disrespects a biologically based gender.

When read within the context of both Genesis 1:26–27 and Deuteronomy 22 as a whole, this behavior is prohibited because it does not respect the sanctity of human bodies as male and female, for whatever reason those distinctions are dissolved. It is not a prohibition against a culturally specific form of dress, but a prohibition against cross-dressing as cross-dressing, the intended dressing as the opposite sex as understood within that culture without respect for a biologically based gender. Like other laws in Deuteronomy, this law is written in light of the practices of surrounding nations because Israel is called as a people set apart by God. Witnessing to the good order of God's creation represents a significant way that Israel can stand apart among the other nations. Humanity survives and thrives as female and male. Otherwise, humanity cannot fill the earth and thus fulfill God's command to act as God's image over all creation, which includes the care of all life, animal as well as human (Deuteronomy 22:1–8). Israel is called to represent the order of creation (Deuteronomy 22:9–11). Deuteronomy 22:5 must be read in light of the call for humanity to act as God's image and for Israel to reflect God's order to other nations.

A final verse in Deuteronomy that is sometimes referenced by critics of transgender behavior is Deuteronomy 23:1, "No one who has been emasculated by crushing or cutting may enter the assembly of the Lord." Deuteronomy 23:1–8 deals with those who may not enter the assembly of Israel, either in the context of worship or the context of leadership. Eunuchs were made such in the Ancient Near East for both religious reasons and certain forms of political service. That particular restriction is abolished by the time of Isaiah (Isaiah 56:2–5). As the story of the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8 makes clear, eunuchs are acceptable to God through Jesus. To apply the restriction of

eunuchs from the assembly of God's people in Deuteronomy 23 to transsexuals today, regardless of the weakness of that application, is meaningless in light of the lifting of that restriction in Isaiah 56 and the example from Acts 8. Jesus himself declares one can become a eunuch for the sake of God's kingdom in Matthew 19:12 (a reference to the abstention from marriage for the sake of service to God).

Another passage cited against transgender behavior is 1 Corinthians 6:9–11 where Paul lists a series of “wrongdoers” who will not enter the kingdom of God including *malakos* and *arsenokoites*. While the latter term denotes a homosexual as one who lies with a man as with a woman, there is debate over the meaning of the first term, which can be translated “soft one.” Most scholars believe it refers to the passive partner in a homosexual relationship, with *arsenokoites* referring to the active partner. Some argue that *malakos* is a reference to effeminate men or men who in some significant way play the part of a woman. Under this interpretation, transgender behaviors like cross-dressing are condemned by Paul. As *malakos* comes between two words for sexual wrongdoers, it is safer to assume sinful sexual behavior is what Paul intends by this word rather than behaviors we might associate with transgenderism.

The latter half of 1 Corinthians 6 may be more instructive in regards to certain behaviors associated with transgenderism. Paul rebukes members of the Corinthian church for visiting prostitutes. Many commentators assume that their rationalization for this behavior was an overly spiritualized or dualistic understanding of Christianity whereby actions committed by the body did not matter in light of the importance of the soul. Paul responds by highlighting the centrality of the body as part of our Christian identity. The physical body is not meant for sexual immorality but for the Lord, as that body will be resurrected by God. If the body is a member of Christ, then it cannot become one flesh with a prostitute. Paul stresses the sanctity of the physical body. It was paid for by God, united with Christ, and is now a temple of the Holy Spirit. The body is no longer one's own to do with as one pleases. Even though Paul's command to glorify God with the body is in response to sexual immorality, the justification he gives for that command covers more than avoidance of sexual immorality. If the body is a temple of the Holy

Spirit, belonging to God, which will be one day resurrected, it should not be rejected or devalued in the meantime.

Finally, 1 Corinthians 11:2–12 is sometimes cited with the assumption that cross-dressing is the problem Paul is seeking to address. Paul commands women to pray with their heads covered while men should pray with their heads uncovered in respect to their gender in the context of worship. One contested explanation of this passage has been that worship within the pagan temples of Corinth involved cross-dressing, and Paul is concerned to distinguish Christian worship from pagan worship by ensuring gender distinction is respected. Regardless of the background, Paul clearly argues for the respect of gender distinction in worship.

Paul stresses the importance of woman and men respecting their nature in the course of their worship and ministry to the church, for men and women need one another (see again Genesis 2:18–24). Differences of gender do not restrict women from praying or prophesying any more than men. The call is to value each one's gender so that the community will be complete by respecting the differences therein, but in communion with each other. Dissolving those distinctions disrespects one sex as much as it does the other, and may disrespect the body overall. The call is to glorify God with the body (1 Corinthians 6:20) and to respect their identities as male and female in the context of worship and Christian community (1 Corinthians 11:2–12).

A Practical Application of the Theology of the Body

How should the Assemblies of God respond to transgender persons?

The question should be reframed in terms of the Great Commission, which is to “make disciples of all nations” (Matthew 28:19). Framed this way, the Church's ministry to transgender persons is essentially the same as its ministry to all persons: *evangelism* that leads to repentance and faith in Jesus Christ, symbolized by baptism, and *discipleship* that teaches converts to obey the commandments of Jesus Christ in ever-increasing measure.

This is not to deny that transgender persons present unique discipleship challenges. For example, how should children's ministers respond—both to the child and to his or her parents—when a child in the church expresses gender dysphoria? If a transgender person (who has undergone surgery and hormone treatment to acquire the external appearance of a member of the opposite sex) comes to faith in Jesus Christ, what does repentance look like for him or her?

Given the theology of the body articulated in the preceding paragraphs, it should be clear that the Church's ministry to transgender persons should help them experience increasing integrity between their birth sex and their gender identity. This is a long-term discipleship goal. However, it is not the only discipleship goal, nor even the first issue that needs to be addressed in the lives of transgender persons. The most fundamental issue in the lives of all persons, after all, is whether they are "in Christ," to use the apostle Paul's term. "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!" (2 Corinthians 5:17). The practical question, then, is how to create an optimal environment for transgender persons to experience new life in Christ.

The first characteristic of such an environment is *self-examination*. Jesus' famous saying regarding the speck and the plank (Matthew 7:3–5) is germane. Bible-believing churches rightly critique contemporary society's warped understandings and immoral practices when it comes to sex. However, there is often a failure to address unloving attitudes toward people with views and practices that are different. Ministry to transgender persons—and LGBT persons more generally—acknowledges and repents of unloving words and deeds that have been spoken or done toward them.

Hospitality is the second characteristic. Social science indicates that transgender persons experience elevated levels of violence, rejection, loneliness, and suicidal thoughts. Contemporary political discourse—which treats transgenderism as a front in the culture war over sexual mores—exacerbates their feelings of alienation and unwelcomeness. A pastoral response to transgender persons cannot even begin if they

experience an unloving, unwelcome environment in the local church. Hospitality, by contrast, welcomes people at the point at which they are met. The Pharisees and scribes said of Jesus, “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them” (Luke 15:2). Shouldn’t the Church follow Jesus’ lead in this regard?

A third characteristic of an optimal environment is *holism*. The temptation pastors must face down is the reduction of transgender persons to their gender dysphoria and related behaviors, as if the adjective *transgender* exhausted the meaning of the noun *person*. Gender dysphoria is a discipleship issue to be sure, but so are lack of faith, prayerlessness, biblical illiteracy, theological error, the deeds of the flesh, etc. Pastors who neglect to address these issues are failing to help transgender persons develop a relationship with Jesus Christ, a biblical worldview, spiritual practices, and a gospel-centered narrative that will in turn help those persons address their gender dysphoria and related behaviors.

A final characteristic is *patience*. Gender dysphoria is shaped over a lifetime by complex causes. Experience teaches that feelings of incongruity between one’s birth sex and gender identity usually do not instantly disappear when a transgender person converts. Of course, the same is true for besetting sins, bad habits, and long-term struggles such as substance addiction. While there are genuine testimonies of instantaneous deliverance, these are rare. Discipleship usually consists of “a long obedience in the same direction,” as one writer has described it. And, as transgender persons undertake this long obedience, a pastoral response to them must be patient, encouraging, correcting, and forgiving of them all along the way. “Or do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness, forbearance and patience, not realizing that God’s kindness is intended to lead you to repentance?” (Romans 2:4).

ALL SCRIPTURE QUOTATIONS ARE FROM THE NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION OF THE BIBLE.

Notes

1. Statistics on the population of LGBTQIA population in the United States and in the world are notoriously difficult to estimate. See Gary Gates, “How many people are lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender?” *The Williams Institute*, April

2011; “A Survey of LGBT Americans: Attitudes, Experiences and values in changing times” from the Pew Research Center, June 13, 2013; “Sexual Orientation and Health Among U.S. Adults: National Health Interview Survey, 2013,” *National Health Statistic Report*, June 14, 2014; “How sexually dimorphic are we? Review and synthesis,” *American Journal of Human Biology* 12:151–166; and “How Many Adults Identify as Transgender in the United States?” *The Williams Institute*, June 2016.

2. See “Suicide Attempts among Transgender and Gender Non-Conforming Adults: Findings of the National Transgender Discrimination Survey,” *The Williams Institute*, January 2014.

POSITION PAPER ON WOMEN IN MINISTERIAL LEADERSHIP

(Adopted by the General Presbytery in session August 4-5, 2025)

Summary

The Bible provides numerous examples of women serving in a variety of ministries. Their work includes both speaking and leading among God’s people. And since the birth of the Assemblies of God, women gifted by the Holy Spirit have served as pastors, missionaries, teachers, and evangelists. The Assemblies of God recognizes the spiritual gifting of women in all aspects and levels of church ministry as revealed in the Scriptures.

Introduction

The Assemblies of God was founded with a powerful experience of the supernatural manifestations and gifts of the Holy Spirit. Pentecostals believe that the outpouring of the Spirit in the early twentieth century continues the fulfillment of the prophecy, “Your sons and daughters will prophesy.... In those days I will pour out my Spirit even on servants—men and women alike” (Joel 2:28–29; cf. Acts 2:16–18).¹ Joel’s prophecy demonstrates the inclusion of women in the ministries of the new covenant age.

Since the earliest days of the Fellowship, spiritual gifting has been clear in the ministries of women. Outstanding female ministers pioneered and directed a broad spectrum of ministries. Some of those ministered in partnership with their husbands. At times, husbands worked secular jobs to support the active ministries of their wives. In other cases, women chose to forego marriage to better fulfill the ministries to which the Lord had called them. Brave women served locally and abroad as missionaries, evangelists, church planters, pastors, educators, and in other roles.

The Bible as Final Authority

The history and practice of the Assemblies of God show that God blesses the public ministry of women. Yet, debate continues about the proper role of women in spiritual leadership. Since the Bible is our final authority in all matters of faith and practice, we must ensure that our stance is founded on Scripture. What the Bible says should be explored as carefully and objectively as possible, using established rules of exegesis and interpretation. This paper gives both historical and theological guidance. It also evaluates the usual texts used to limit or deny the ministry of women.

Exploring a text's original culture and context is needed to grasp its meaning. For instance, 1 Corinthians 7:1 starts with "Now regarding the questions you asked in your letter." That phrase, "now regarding," was repeated by Paul as he answered questions the Corinthians asked. First Corinthians holds some of Paul's answers, but it only reveals fragments of the Corinthians' questions. A deeper study of the letter will reconstruct the questions they asked.

For Paul's letters to Timothy, the situation in Ephesus must be understood. Acts 19:8–41 is one key to understanding. It reveals that magic and the worship of Artemis are parts of that situation. Also, Paul told the men in Ephesus to stop arguing during prayer (1 Timothy 2:8). The Bible includes no other account of Paul giving similar instructions. This was likely a problem specific to the Ephesian church. The task of grasping the

meaning of Scripture requires careful discernment. The reader must discern between timeless theological principles and advice meant for an audience in their unique context.

Some Christian groups disagree on how certain passages of Scripture should be interpreted. This has led some to deny what Pentecostalism affirms about women in ministry leadership. Charity is called for toward traditions that may disagree with our findings. We also recognize that concessions have been made to plant churches in strongly patriarchal contexts.

Biblical Examples of Women in Ministerial Leadership

The Old Testament records strong female leadership through several striking examples. Miriam was a prophet and worship leader to Israel during the Exodus alongside her brothers, Moses and Aaron (Exodus 15:20; Micah 6:4). Deborah, a prophet and a judge, directed Barak to lead the army into combat against Israel's oppressors (Judges 4–5). Huldah, a prophet, verified the scroll of the Law found in the temple. She helped spark religious reform in the days of Josiah (2 Kings 22:14–20; 2 Chronicles 34:22–28).

Ministry in the New Testament is charismatic in nature. That means it is made possible as the Holy Spirit distributes spiritual gifts (*charismata*) as He chooses to each member of the body of Christ (Romans 12:6–8; 1 Corinthians 12:7–11, 27–28; Ephesians 4:7–12; 1 Peter 4:10–11). Some gifts are a spontaneous work of the Spirit. Others are recognized ministry gifts to the Body. The Spirit gives all the gifts for service without regard to sex. For example, the gift of prophecy is explicitly for both men and women: “Your sons and your daughters will prophesy” (Acts 2:17). The New Testament confirms that women received and exercised this gift of the Spirit (Acts 21:9; 1 Corinthians 11:5).

Women engaged in ministry and proclamation even before the Day of Pentecost. A Samaritan woman introduced her town to Jesus. Many from the woman's town “believed in him because of the woman's testimony” (John 4:39, NIV). Women were

also the first witnesses of the resurrection of Christ. They were instructed to share this great news with the disciples (Matthew 28:1–8).

The New Testament shows that women filled important ministry roles after the Day of Pentecost as well. Tabitha (Dorcas) started a benevolence ministry (Acts 9:36). One of the early house churches met at the home of Lydia (Acts 16:14–15, 40). Her home also seems to have become a base for the Philippian church.

A number of women are named as ministry colleagues. Paul named two women in Philippi, Euodia and Syntyche, as women who “have contended at my side in the cause of the gospel” (Philippians 4:2–3, NIV). In Romans 16, Paul greeted both male and female ministry colleagues using the word *kopiaō*. This term noted the “work” or “labor” of Mary, Tryphena, Tryphosa, and Persis (Romans 16:6, 12). Elsewhere, Paul uses *kopiaō* for the labor of ministry (1 Corinthians 16:16; 1 Thessalonians 5:12; 1 Timothy 5:17).

Priscilla is another of Paul’s “co-workers in Christ Jesus” (Romans 16:3–4, NIV). She is named with her husband, Aquila, as a teacher of Apollos. The couple “took him aside and explained the way of God even more accurately” (Acts 18:26). Acts also makes it clear that Apollos had a strong ministry of “proving from the Scriptures that Jesus was the Messiah” (Acts 18:24–28, NIV). When the ministry team of Priscilla and Aquila is mentioned, she is named first when the names are paired together. This reveals that she had the leading role in correcting and instructing this recognized male leader.

Women were active in prophecy in the Early Church. The Bible points out that Philip’s four unmarried daughters were prophets (Acts 21:8–9). First Corinthians 11:2–16 also reveals that the men and women of the church were praying and prophesying.

Women were also named as deacons. Phoebe, a leader in the church at Cenchrea, is highly commended to the church at Rome by Paul (Romans 16:1–2). Unfortunately, translation biases have obscured Phoebe’s leadership position, calling her just a “servant” (KJV, NASB, ESV). Yet Phoebe was *diakonos* of the church at Cenchrea.

Paul regularly uses this term for a minister or leader of a church. He also applied it to Jesus Christ, Tychicus, Epaphras, Timothy, and his own ministry.

Based on the context, *diakonos* tends to be translated as “deacon” or “minister.” Some translators choose the word “deaconess” (e.g., RSV) despite *diakonos* being a masculine noun. So, it seems that *diakonos* is the title for an official leadership position in the Early Church. And the proper translation for Phoebe’s role is “deacon” (NIV, NLT, NRSV) or “minister.” Also, some translations reveal a bias by referring to Phoebe as being “helpful” (NLT) or a “helper” (NASB) of others, including Paul (Romans 16:2). Based on new analysis of ancient Greek manuscripts, Phoebe is called either a *prostatis* or *prostatēs* by Paul. Both terms are leadership titles.

A final, key example is Paul identifying Junia as an apostle (Romans 16:7). Beginning in the thirteenth century, some scholars and translators masculinized her name to Junias. It seems they were unwilling to admit that there was a female apostle. The name *Junia* is found more than 250 times in Rome alone. However, the masculine form *Junias* is unknown in any Greco-Roman source. This deliberate change of the Greek has now been corrected in the texts used by pastors and scholars.

Scripture clearly advocates for women as ministers and leaders. Instances of women filling leadership roles in the Bible should be taken as a divinely approved pattern. It should not be seen as an exception to divine decrees.

Historical and Global Precedent

Evidence for women leading in ministry exists beyond the New Testament. There is also archaeological evidence of female leadership from the second century.² Yet, the third century brought changes into the Church. Leadership became less of a charismatic function and more of a formal office. This transition changed the role of women.

One theory is that women led alongside men when a church met in homes. A home was more culturally acceptable as a place for women to lead at that time. When churches

began to meet in public spaces, though, leadership positions were reserved for men. In other words, the exclusion of women from leadership positions in the Early Church occurred as a concession to the greater culture.

The history of the Church has been blessed by times of revival.³ These moments offered renewal and strength by the power of the Holy Spirit. The early stages of most revivals are full of spiritual fervor and a focus on the Lord's return. In these moments, there tends to be more acceptance of dynamic, pioneering female ministers. Over time, young churches often embrace more structure and institutional concerns come to the forefront. This leads to the spiritual leadership of women being less readily accepted. Church leadership then becomes more dominantly male.

The experience of the Assemblies of God has been no exception. Early Pentecostal ministry featured notable women like Maria B. Woodworth-Etter, Aimee Semple McPherson, Alice Reynolds Flower, Anna Ziese, and Marie Burgess Brown. Women had great freedom to minister in the early days of the Fellowship. Yet, there was a pronounced drop in the proportion of women leaders in the early 1920s. More recently, the number of credentialed women has been growing.

In their history, modern Pentecostals have struggled to apply the Bible's truth in widely divergent cultural contexts. Some settings accept female spiritual leadership quickly and easily. Others are less accepting. In places where women have limited ministry, leadership posts are withheld. At times, female missionaries find that the leadership role they hold in their home country differs from what they experience on the field. There may also be a discrepancy between their ministry opportunities on the field and those of women in the culture they serve. Cultures may influence the nature and extent of female leadership. However, the Church must always look to Scripture for direction beyond contextual practices.

A Survey of Disputed Passages⁴

Only two passages in the New Testament seem to prohibit the ministry of women in a church (1 Corinthians 14:34–35; 1 Timothy 2:12). When viewed in light of Paul’s other statements and practices, they cannot be absolute prohibitions of the ministry of women. Instead, they dealt with specific, local problems in need of correction. So, Paul’s true perspective is seen in his consistent affirmation of women who ministered and led in his churches. The content of these two passages, often subject to conflicting interpretation, must be reassessed.

First Corinthians 11:3–12

Christians have discussed the phrase “man is the head of the woman” for centuries. Some use it to justify male superiority. Others apply it to exclude women from spiritual leadership. Two possible translations for *kephalē* (“head”) are key to this discussion. Contemporary evangelical scholars debate between (1) “authority over” and (2) “source” or “origin.” Both meanings are found in the literature of Paul’s time.

Taking the whole passage, the second meaning fits better than the first. This is clearly seen in the summary statement of verse 12, where *kephalē* is not used: “The first woman came from man, every other man was born from a woman, and everything comes from God.” Even the relationship between the eternal Son and the Father— “the head of Christ is God” (11:3)—is better understood as “source” than as “authority over” (cf. John 8:42). We do not find that the use of *kephalē* gives reason to deny leadership roles to women. A survey of the biblical examples of women in positions of spiritual authority and the whole counsel of Scripture makes this clear.

First Corinthians 14:34–35

It takes careful interpretation to find what Paul limited when he wrote, “Women should be silent during the church meetings. It is not proper for them to speak” (1 Corinthians 14:34). Paul addressed order in charismatic worship. He used the word *sigatō* (“silent”)

three times in this chapter, including to limit the speech of women. The same word is used to limit the speech of those speaking in tongues if there is no interpretation (1 Corinthians 14:28). The second group that is limited by this word is prophets when a prophecy (or judgment of prophecy) is given to another person (verse 30). Third, that instruction is given to women. In certain circumstances, the speech of tongues speakers, prophets, and women is to be silenced in the church.

Under what circumstances, then, is the speech of women to be limited? Options given by scholars include (1) chatter in public services, (2) ecstatic disruptions, (3) authoritative speech (such as judging prophecies), and (4) asking questions during the service. However, it is clear that Paul allowed women to pray and prophesy in public worship at Corinth (1 Corinthians 11:5). Paul also shared that those who prophesy, including women, should take part in judging prophecies (1 Corinthians 14:29). The limitation is this: “They should ask their own husbands at home” (verse 35, NIV). The instruction is therefore to wives, not all women.

Further, the Greek word translated as “ask” is *eperōtaō*. In the New Testament, it almost always has a sense of interrogation, not of a simple request. Wives are to judge or question their husband’s prophecy at home, not in the assembly. Paul does not prohibit female leadership. He simply admonishes that “everything is done properly and in order” (1 Corinthians 14:40). Clearly, 1 Corinthians 14:34–35 continues the congregational instructions for order in charismatic worship. It is not a change of topic.

First Timothy 2:8–15

Paul’s statement, “I do not let women teach men or have authority over them. Let them listen quietly” (1 Timothy 2:12), has puzzled interpreters. This puzzle led to a variety of views on what Paul intended regarding the women in Ephesus.

From the earlier survey of passages on women in ministry, one can see that Paul recognized the ministerial leadership of women. There are obvious problems in Ephesus, not just with women. Paul told the men to stop fighting during prayer (1

Timothy 2:8; see also 1 Timothy 3:3). Some of the women were given to inappropriate apparel and adornment (1 Timothy 2:9). Paul commanded that the women learn (the only command in the passage). They are to do so calmly, under self-control (1 Timothy 2:11).

A careful reading of 1 Timothy 2:8–15 makes Paul’s intent clearer. He gave Timothy advice that dealt with the church at Ephesus specifically. It involved heretical teachings and practices, including aggressive and inappropriate behavior by men and women. The local cult of Artemis (Acts 19) taught that Artemis was the source of life and knowledge. First Timothy 2:13–15 makes the most sense as a direct rejection of this. Paul sent commands to the women to learn and limit them from teaching the claims of the Artemis heresy. Other passages show that the exclusion of women from ministry was not normal in Pauline churches.

The instructions for men to stop fighting were directed to Ephesus only. Apparently, other churches did not have the same struggle during prayer. The instructions that limit teaching by women relate to the content of the Ephesian heresy. In 2 Timothy 2:2, Paul instructed Timothy to find people who can teach, not just men. He also greeted Priscilla (2 Timothy 4:19). Conspicuously absent in his greeting is any instruction that Priscilla should cease her teaching for which she is known in the Book of Acts.

First Timothy 3:1–13

Some hold a view that instruction to “overseers” (NIV) and deacons confirms that all leaders in the Early Church were supposed to be males. These verses note male leadership due to the male-dominated society at the time. However, there is also strong evidence for female leaders.

The *New Living Translation* (NLT) translates verse 11, “In the same way, their wives must be respected and must not slander others. They must exercise self-control and be faithful in everything they do.” This is typical of modern English versions.

The NLT translators, like those of the NIV 1984, decided that the verse refers to the

wives of deacons. However, the word translated as “wives” is the plural of the Greek word *gynē*. This term is translated as either “woman” or “wife” depending on the context. The NIV 2011, NASB, and NRSV render the plural form of *gynē* here as “women,” not wives. The NLT and NIV 1984 list “deaconesses” as an alternate reading in their footnotes. Phoebe is explicitly identified as a “deacon” in Romans 16:1. It is worth noting that deacons are to be tested. This is not required of the so-called “overseer” (1 Timothy 3:10). It may not be the case that deacons were of lower rank in the Pauline communities! First Timothy 3:11 addressed the qualifications of women in spiritual leadership who were identified as “deacons.”

The cultural milieu of the first century produced a primarily male church leadership. Yet, this passage, along with other biblical evidence (e.g., Acts 21:9; Romans 16:1–15; Philippians 4:2–3), reveals female leadership. They also show that it was neither prohibited in Paul’s day nor today. Passages that imply most leaders were male do not prove that all leaders are male. Furthermore, the biblical record speaks approvingly of many female leaders. First Timothy 3:1–13 does not disqualify women. Otherwise, that same way of reading the text could be used to disqualify unmarried men and men without children from leadership because leaders are addressed as if they are married with children.

Affirmations

A careful study of key translations and biblical passages revealed the active role of women in the church of the first century. With a desire to apply God’s Word to contemporary church practice, we conclude that there is no convincing evidence that the ministry of women is restricted by any sacred or immutable principle. Therefore, we offer the following affirmations:

1. We affirm the rejection of all prejudice and self-promotion by men or women. The existence of bigotry against women in our world, and all too often in churches, cannot be denied. But there is no place for such an attitude in the body of Christ.
2. We acknowledge that the attitudes of secular society, based on long-standing practice and tradition, have influenced the application of biblical principles to local circumstances. We desire to both respect and help redeem cultures at variance

with kingdom principles. We affirm that the Great Commission takes priority over other considerations. Our task is to reach men and women for Christ, regardless of their cultural or ethnic customs.

3. We affirm that the message of redemption has been carried to remote parts of the world through the ministry of dedicated, Spirit-filled women and men. A believer's gifts and anointing should still allow her or his ministry today.
4. We affirm that Pentecostal ministry must always be a divine calling, confirmed by the Spirit with special gifts. It is not a profession to which men or women merely aspire.
5. We affirm that the Assemblies of God has been blessed and must continue to be blessed by the ministry of God's gifted and commissioned daughters.
6. The Bible repeatedly affirms that God pours His Spirit upon women and men. Thereby, He gifts both sexes for ministry in His Church. Therefore, we continue to affirm the gifts of women in ministry and spiritual leadership.

The Great Commission challenges us to "Go and make disciples of all the nations" (Matthew 28:19). The size of this challenge surely requires the full deployment of all God's Spirit-gifted ministers, whether male or female.

Guidelines

In view of these affirmations, we recommend the following guidelines:

1. Preach about the ministry and gifting of women before the church. This topic should come from a normal series on ministry or calling, not only from days given to women-specific issues like Mother's Day. Promote the biblical support of women in ministerial leadership.
2. Review the Constitution and Bylaws for your local church or ministry regarding the role of women (e.g., do they imply that only men can be pastors and board members). Update them if necessary. The General Presbytery approved in 2022 two excellent samples of local church bylaws. You can find them at <https://ag.org/About/Leadership%20Team/General%20Secretary#Bylaws>.
3. Provide policies, guidelines, and training throughout the church for all female and male leaders. Adopt policies that require morally safe boundaries that everyone practices and that are applied equally.
4. Be aware of analogies or language used in policy, trainings, and gatherings that are gender exclusive. For example, rather than use "father/son" language to describe the mentor relationship, use "mentor/mentee," use "parent church" rather than "mother church," and use "pastor's spouse" rather than "pastor's wife." Words matter.
5. Encourage God's giftings in women and men equally without steering them into traditional roles based on historical or cultural norms. If a boy and a girl feel a call to ministry, do not mentor the boy toward lead pastoring and the girl toward kids'

ministry. Let them both know they can do all the above based on their calling and preparation. Where people end up in ministry has much to do with how they are mentored, affirmed, and given opportunities.

6. Men and women need to champion the advancement of women. Be prepared to open doors based on one's calling. Suggest someone's name when an opportunity arises. Get to know the skills, interests, and gifts of female colleagues to be better prepared to promote them to ministerial leadership roles when the opportunity arises.
7. Provide mentoring for men and women equally, aligned with their interests, calling, giftings, and needs within the community. Women may struggle to find a pastor willing to supervise or work with them. Efforts to "avoid the appearance of evil" do not justify ignoring the ministry or mentoring of women.

The image of God is reflected in "male and female" (Genesis 1:27). Similarly, the Church of Jesus is healthiest when women and men are empowered to fulfill their calling at every level of ministerial leadership. The Spirit empowers women and men for the glory of God and the good of the Church.

Bible Translations and Versions Abbreviations

ESV - English Standard Version

KJV - King James Version

NASB - The New American Standard Bible

NIV - New International Version

NLT - New Living Translation

NRSV - New Revised Standard Version

RSV - The Revised Standard Version

Notes

1. All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV®. Copyright ©1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.® Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. www.zondervan.com.
The "NIV" and "New International Version" are trademarks registered in the United States Patent and Trademark Office by Biblica, Inc.®
2. Laurie Guy, *Introducing Early Christianity* (InterVarsity Press, 2004), 178–180.
3. See the Assemblies of God position paper on "Revival and Spiritual Renewal" (2024) at ag.org/Beliefs/Position-Papers/Revival-and-Spiritual-Renewal.

4. For more detail, see *Discovering Biblical Equality: Biblical, Theological, Cultural & Practical Perspectives* (InterVarsity Press, 2021) and Waldemar Kowalski, "What Paul Really Taught about Women" (Gospel Publishing House, 2026).

POSITION PAPER ON WORSHIP IN THE BIBLE

(Adopted by the General Presbytery in session August 13, 2008)

Disagreement over worship styles is one of the most divisive issues in Christian congregations today. Those who grew up singing traditional hymns and gospel songs, more often the older members of the congregation, frequently find themselves perplexed and uncomfortable with the contemporary lyrics and rhythms preferred by their younger brothers and sisters in Christ. More often than not, younger believers who have grown up in an intense and varied media environment find it difficult to relate to music and hymnody that often seems to them to be archaic. Such differences in musical tastes are often generational, but not always. Some elders do prefer the contemporary; occasionally the young are in search of an "ancient-future" church with a venerable music tradition.

As congregations attempt to resolve these preferences by moving exclusively to one style or the other, or by blending both, conflict often erupts. The popular term "worship wars" is doubtless overdone, but the disruption in many congregations at times makes it seem apropos. All too often, congregations split over the issue, or significant numbers withdraw for association with a congregation with a worship style more to their liking. As a result, the body of Christ is often weakened and deflected from its mission.

The intent of this paper is not to develop a case for any particular worship style. Rather, it is an effort to set forth for all sincere worshippers what the Scriptures say about worship. How is worship defined biblically? And what are the implications for the health and stability of local congregations?

Terms for Worship

The English noun "worship" is well suited to convey the biblical understanding of reverence, honor, and praise to God. It derives from the combination of two Middle English and Anglo-Saxon terms meaning respectively "worthy" and "ship," thus is often loosely rendered as "worth-ship." Etymologically, its early meaning was expressed by such terms as "honor," "repute," "credit;" "dignity," "importance," "rank;" or "a person of standing or importance." The second and now dominant meaning is "the reverence or veneration tendered a divine being or supernatural power," or "an act, process, or instance of expressing such veneration by performing or taking part in religious exercises or ritual."¹

"Worship" is therefore a comprehensive English word that encompasses attitudes as well as various private and public, individual and corporate ritual practices. It is not restricted to any particular part of a religious gathering, e.g. prayers, singing, musical performances, preaching, and so forth. Nor is it restricted to religious gatherings.

Biblical theology, of course, must always be drawn, not from English, but from relevant Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek words and concepts in the Old and New Testaments. In this case, the English word "worship" appears well-suited to describe the proper relationships of human beings to their Creator God as taught in Scripture. Nonetheless, the Christian understanding and practice of worship must first be shaped by study of the biblical text.

Old Testament Terms for "Worship"

While there are numerous Hebrew words for worship in the Old Testament, three are particularly significant.²

Hawâ. The most significant is the verb *hawâ*, which occurs 173 times and primarily means willingly "to bow down" to human beings, idols, or God. Describing a specifically

religious act, the term occurs 110 times. For example, when Abraham rushed to meet his visitors in Genesis 18:2, he “bowed low to the ground.”³

With regard to pagan gods, Yahweh had commanded, “You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God...” (Exodus 20:5). Nonetheless, disobedient Israelites as well as pagans worshipped idols. So, over one-half of the incidents of religious bowing down in the Old Testament are, in fact, to pagan deities. When King Amaziah of Judah defeated the Edomites, he confiscated their gods and promptly “set them up as his own gods, bowed down to them and burned sacrifices to them” (2 Chronicles 25:14).

Proper worship for the God of Israel is found in such admonitions as Psalm 29:2: “Ascribe to the Lord the glory due his name; worship (hawâ) the Lord in the splendor of his holiness,” and Psalm 95:6, “Come, let us bow down (hawâ) in worship, let us kneel before the Lord our Maker.” True worship also includes praise. “Then David said to the whole assembly, ‘Praise the Lord your God.’ So they all praised the Lord, the God of their fathers; they bowed low and fell prostrate (hawâ) before the Lord and the king” (1 Chronicles 29:20).

Yare’. The verb yare’, found 317 times, may denote both terror toward humans or gods as well as awe and worship of the God of Israel. Thus Moses is commanded not to “be afraid (yare’)” of Og, king of Bashan (Deuteronomy 3:2). However, Israel is to “fear (yare’) the Lord your God, [and] serve him only...” (Deuteronomy 6:13).

‘Abad. The verb ‘abad, found 290 times, means essentially “to serve” and is used in both public and religious life. The concepts of serving God and worshipping Him tend to overlap. Thus in Exodus 3:12, “God said, ‘I will be with you. And this will be the sign to you that it is I who have sent you: When you have brought the people out of Egypt, you will worship (‘abad) God on this mountain.’” And in Malachi. 3:18: “You will again see the distinction between the righteous and the wicked, between those who serve(‘abad) God and those who do not.”

Old Testament Terms for “Praise”

Words associated with “praise” are used about as often in the Old Testament as the words for “worship” above.

Barak. The verb barak is found 327 times and is usually translated “to bless.” It has to do with people blessing others, God blessing His people, and people blessing God. When people “bless” God in the Psalms, the NIV usually translates it “praise” as in Psalms 63:4: “I will praise (barak) you as long as I live, and in your name will I lift up my hands.”

Halal The verb halal is used 146 times, most often in the Psalms, and means “to praise, boast, [or] exult,” and usually refers to praise of God, often in conjunction with music and singing. “I will praise (halal) the Lord all my life; I will sing praise to my God as long as I live” (Psalms 146:2; cf. 149:1; 150).

Yadâ. The verb yadâ, used 111 times, means “to praise, (give) thanks, [or] confess” as an acknowledgment of His person and work. The majority of references are found in the Psalms. For example, Psalms 106:1: “Praise (halal) the Lord. Give thanks (yadâ) to the Lord, for he is good; his love endures forever” (cf. Psalms 107:1; 136:1-3,26).

New Testament Terms for “Worship”

The Greek New Testament relies on one basic word for “worship” but there are several others used occasionally.

Proskyneō. Used 60 times, proskyneō is the key Greek verb for “to worship.” It means “to fall down and/or worship someone or something” and seems to have meant originally “to kiss” a deity (which would require falling down before or bending to the idol).⁴ Such worship is properly addressed only to God or Jesus. Thus, the man blind from birth, healed by Jesus, responded, “Lord, I believe,” and “he worshiped (proskyneō) him” (John 9:38).

To be sure, *proskyneo* is sometimes used to denote reverence paid to humans, idols, demons, or Satan. But when worship is thus solicited (Revelation 9:20; 13:4,8,12), it is a usurpation of that which belongs rightly to God.⁵

Latreuo. The verb *latreuo* is used 21 times to denote religiously oriented service, whether to God or idols. In Stephen's sermon, God said of captive Israel: "Afterward they will come out of that country [Egypt] and worship (*latreuo*) me in this place [Sinai]" (Acts 7:7; see also Hebrews 9:14; 12:22-28). Later, because of disobedience, God "gave [Israel] over to the worship (*latreuo*) of the heavenly bodies (Acts 7:42).

Sebo. The verb *sebo*, also meaning "to worship," is found 10 times in the New Testament; it includes the ideas of reverence and awe. One example is Matthew 15:9: "They worship (*sebo*) me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men." Paul's observation in Romans 1:25 utilizes both the preceding terms: "They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped (*sebo*) and served (*latreuo*) created things rather than the Creator."

Worship in the New Testament

In New Testament teaching, worship clearly is to be directed only to God, meaning the Triune God. When tempted by the evil one, Jesus emphatically declared the exclusivity of Christian worship, " 'Worship (*proskyneo*) the Lord your God, and serve (*latreuo*) him only' " (Matthew 4:10). Jesus is worshipped as God.

The nature of worship is perhaps best described in the words of Jesus as He addressed the wayward Samaritan woman: "Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship (*proskyneo*) the Father in spirit and truth (*en pneumati kai aletheia*), for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth (*en pneumati kai aletheia*)" (John 4:23,24). Translators frequently have rendered "spirit" with a lower case "s," as in NIV. This interpretation identifies "spirit" as the human spirit and thus calls human worshippers to sincerity and a right attitude.

However, John appears deliberately to have drawn together the terms "spirit" and "truth" so as to mean, in effect, "Spirit of truth." Exegetes assert that such an understanding better suits the grammar and immediate flow of thought, as well the larger context of John's teaching on the Spirit (1:32f.; 3:5-8,34; 6:63; 7:39; 11:33; 13:21; 14:17,26; 15:26; 16:13; 20:22; and the Paraclete, 14:16,26; 15:26; 16:7).⁶ Thus, Jesus is saying that believers can truly worship only with the help of the Spirit of truth who sanctifies and illuminates them by means of the truth of God's Word—the truth about God and the truth about humans, their sin and salvation. "In true worship there is an encounter with God for which God must make man capable by His grace."⁷

In view of the above, Paul's comment seems particularly apt: "For it is we who are the circumcision, we who worship (latreuo) by the Spirit of God, who glory in Christ Jesus, and who put no confidence in the flesh..." (Philippians 3:3).

It should be noted, however, that worship is often usurped by Satan as in the temptation of Jesus, " 'All this I will give you...if you will bow down and worship (proskyneo) me' " (Matthew 4:9). Speaking of the Antichrist and the Great Tribulation, Paul wrote, "He will oppose and will exalt himself over everything that is called God or is worshiped (sebasma), so that he sets himself up in God's temple, proclaiming himself to be God" (2 Thessalonians 2:4). Of this same time, John in the Revelation observed, "Men worshiped (proskyneo) the dragon because he had given authority to the beast, and they also worshiped (proskyneo) the beast and asked, 'Who is like the beast? Who can make war against him?' " (13:4; cf. vv.8,12). Even after the Great Tribulation judgments of the seals and trumpets, surviving humans "did not stop worshiping (proskyneo) demons, and idols of gold, silver, bronze, stone and wood—idols that cannot see or hear or walk" (Revelation 9:20).

Worship As Lifestyle

While the focus of this paper is on the nature of worship in the gathered Christian community, worship is to be much more pervasive. The Samaritan woman to whom

Jesus spoke was fixated on places of worship. Jesus told her the time would come when neither the Samaritan holy place, Mount Gerizim, nor the Jewish temple in Jerusalem would be significant. What is important, He said, is that “true worshipers...worship the Father in spirit and truth” (John 4:21,24), requiring neither buildings nor rites. Paul urged the Romans “to offer your bodies as living sacrifices (thysia), holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship (latreia; from the verb latreuo)” (Romans 12:1). Paul used the language of the tabernacle/temple sacrifices and services to communicate that worship of God is properly a constant, living reality in every dimension of the believer’s life. Worship must pervade a person’s heart in daily living before it can be properly expressed in public.

Music and Song in Worship

Music and musical instruments appear near the beginning of the biblical record. As early as Genesis 4:21, Jubal is mentioned as the “father of all who play the harp and flute.” The Old Testament mentions 16 or more musical instruments in both worship and non-worship settings. The New Testament mentions four (or five if the “gong” of 1 Corinthians 13:1 is included).

The Creator himself declared, “The morning stars sang together and all the angels shouted for joy” at the dawn of creation (Job 38:7). David, “Israel’s singer of songs” (2 Samuel 23:1), said, “He [the Lord] put a new song in my mouth, a hymn of praise to our God” (Psalms 40:3). And Isaiah prophesied, “You will go out in joy and be led forth in peace; the mountains and hills will burst into song before you, and all the trees of the field will clap their hands” (Isaiah 55:12).

Organized music and choirs developed rapidly in David’s time, given his personal musical genius and his reverence toward the ark and the tabernacle/temple as God’s dwelling. David appointed Levites as “singers to sing joyful songs, accompanied by musical instruments: lyres, harps, and cymbals” (1 Chronicles 15:16-22; cf. 2 Chronicles 29:25,26; 35:15). “Four thousand are to be gatekeepers and four thousand are to praise

the Lord with the musical instruments I have provided for that purpose" (1 Chronicles 23:5; cf. 2 Chron. 5:12,13). In fact, the word "psalm" (psalmos, from psallo, originally "to pluck" or "to play") itself implies use of musical instruments. Interrupted by the Exile, Israel's musical tradition resumed following her return from captivity, the rebuilding of Jerusalem, and the completion of the second temple (cf. Nehemiah 7:1; 12:27).

Though there is little information in the Gospels and Acts, Jesus, the Apostles, and the believers of the Early Church would have been the beneficiaries of the musical ministries of the organized choirs and musicians of the temple. While the New Testament says nothing about musical instruments per se in the early Christian house churches, music and song were a part of Spirit-filled worship (Acts 16:25; 1 Corinthians 14:14,15,26; Ephesians 5:19; Colossians 3:16). Apparently there was a variety of styles and content in the congregational singing, though there is no evidence of church choirs or special numbers. The convictions of certain denominations against musical instruments notwithstanding, the New Testament does not prohibit any kind of musical instrument.

In fact, Revelation depicts repeated scenes of heavenly worship featuring musical instruments and songs, as well as verbal celebration of the glory and power of God. The worshipping throng of Revelation 5, some with harp in hand, climaxed their songs to God and the Lamb with "praise and honor and glory and power, forever and ever!" (Revelation 5:13). The 144,000 sang to the Lamb "a new song before the throne and before the four living creatures and the elders" (Revelation 14:3). Those who overcame the beast "held harps given them by God and sang the song of Moses the servant of God and the song of the Lamb: 'Great and marvelous are your deeds, Lord God Almighty' " (Revelation 15:3). The vision of the Lord descending in power and glory is also prefaced by shouts of worship and praise (Revelation 19:1-8). The final word of the angel in that setting is, "Worship God! For the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy" (Revelation 19:10).

While particular aptitude in the music arts is not specifically mentioned among the spiritual gift lists of the New Testament (cf. Romans 12:6-8; 1 Corinthians 12:8-10,28; Ephesians 4:11; 1 Peter 4:10,11), remember that these lists are probably ad hoc and noncomprehensive. Just as God by His Spirit specifically gifted Bezalel and Oholiab for the artistry of the tabernacle and its furnishings (Exodus 35:30-35)—another gifting not mentioned in the New Testament—it seems evident that He gifted David (2 Samuel 23:1; Psalms 40:3) for music and psalms and continues similarly to gift yielded believers.

Places and Buildings in Worship

Certain places and buildings, often appointed by God himself, have been utilized in worship by God's people through the centuries. Abraham built altars and called upon the name of God as he journeyed through Canaan (Genesis 12:8; 26:25). God revealed himself to Jacob at Bethel whereupon Jacob set up and anointed a pillar of stone (Genesis 28:10-22). Jacob later returned to Bethel and built an altar there (Genesis 35:1). Upon meeting Moses at Sinai, God gave him a sign that, when the Israelites came out of Egypt, they would "worship God on this mountain" (Exodus 3:12). God had a particular place chosen in advance where He would enter into covenant with His chosen people.

God himself gave Moses the plan for the tabernacle and its furnishings (Exodus 39:42). The Israelites supplied the materials by means of a free-will offering (Exodus 35:1-29). God gifted Bezalel and Oholiab by His Spirit in order to accomplish the construction (Exodus 35:30-35). And when the tabernacle was completed and dedicated, God honored the efforts of Moses and the people by descending upon it in glory (Exodus 40:34). The tabernacle complex was strategically located in the midst of the people symbolizing God's dwelling with them, yet carefully safeguarded to signify His holiness (Numbers 3:38).

While the first temple in Jerusalem was constructed under the leadership of Solomon, the complex was designed by David who said “the Spirit had put in his mind [the plans] for the courts of the temple of the Lord and all the surrounding rooms” (1 Chronicles 28:12). The basic interior design of the temple remained that which God had revealed to Moses for the original tabernacle.

Worship centered in the tabernacle and temple utilized furnishings and vessels of God’s design, including the ark of the covenant, the table for bread, the lamp stand, the altar of incense, the laver for washings, and the altar of burnt offerings (Exodus 37-40). Even the utensils for the sacrifices and other rituals of the tabernacle were determined by the Lord and especially dedicated to His service. Belshazzar’s irreverent use of these confiscated temple vessels in dissipated, idolatrous revelry was the immediate occasion of God’s announcement of doom for the Babylonian empire (Daniel 5).

The extensive sacrificial rituals of tabernacle and temple were instituted by the Lord himself as the Book of Leviticus asserts in great detail. Through physical accouterments and observable rites, God visually instructed His people as to the reality and seriousness of their sins and the means of their atonement. As the Book of Hebrews reminds us, the blood sacrifices and other practices foreshadowed the atoning death of the Lord Jesus Christ.

When worship becomes corrupted, however, God is not permanently bound to places and furnishings He may have previously blessed, not even the Jerusalem temple and its furnishings. The departure of the glory of God from the temple and Jerusalem (Ezekiel 10), only to return at the time of eschatological cleansing and restoration (Ezekiel 43:1-5), is a vivid picture of divine rejection of corrupt religious institutions.

Early Christians gathered first in the temple which was beautifully restored by Herod the Great. They appear also to have utilized their local synagogues. But they also began immediately to use alternate locations in various houses (Acts 2:46; 5:42; Luke 24:53). The Upper Room (Acts 1:13), perhaps the same room as that of the Last Supper—which may well have been John Mark’s mother’s house (Acts 12:12)—was one such

place. Aquila and Priscilla had churches in their homes at Ephesus and Rome (1 Corinthians 16:19; Romans 16:5), and probably in Corinth as well, as did Titius Justus (Acts 18:7). Nympha had a church in her home in Laodicea (Colossians 4:15); Philemon had a church in his home in Colossae (Philippians 2). Lydia appears to have had a church in her home in Philippi (Acts 16:15,40). Doubtless these home churches were multiplied many times over.

The temple of Jesus' day was no more sacrosanct than Solomon's temple that had been destroyed at the time of the exile. Jesus proclaimed himself greater than the temple (Matthew 12:5,6), seems to have cleansed it at both the beginning and end of His ministry (John 2:12-22; Mark 11:15-28; par. Matthew 21:12-16; Luke 19:45-47), and predicted its impending destruction because of Israel's rejection (Matthew 24:1,2; cf. 23:37,38). Jesus, in His own person and redemptive ministry, displaced the temple and made it obsolete (Acts 7:48; Hebrews 9:23-26; 8:1,2).

Rituals in Worship

Human beings have always used certain objects and rituals, or ceremonies, to facilitate their worship. Historic churches often use the word "liturgy" for these worship practices. Liturgy comes from the Greek word group leitourgeo/leitourgia having to do with public, and often religious, service (Acts 13:2). A good definition is "prescribed forms of ritual for public worship in any of various Christian churches." While most often used of high church rites, the term "liturgy" may be applied to any religious ritual, simple or highly stylized, high church or low.

Cain and Abel settled on certain ways to present their respective offerings to God; one accepted and the other not (Genesis 4:2-5). Abraham's particular approaches to God were found acceptable as were those of Isaac and Jacob. The tabernacle utilized developed rituals ordered by God himself that became even more extensive in the first and second temples.

The early Christian congregations had their own rituals. “Beyond doubt there were certain fixed elements in the worship of the Pauline congregation. But generally, ‘the liturgy in the first congregations is something extraordinarily alive, and liturgical formulae show no sign of being paralysed (sic). All members take part in the liturgy.’”⁸ However, those liturgies, or rituals, that may be observed in the New Testament, such as teachings on water baptism and the Lord’s Supper, are relatively simple (yet profound), transportable and easily adaptable within different cultures. They set forth the essential truths of the gospel but without intent to prescribe any one perfect ritual to celebrate the various events memorialized by the Christian calendar. It is faithful and regular re-presentation of the gospel in community worship that is important. Paul’s correction of the Corinthian disrespect for the Lord’s Supper is an instructive model for healthy ritual practice (1 Corinthians 11:17-34).

Unacceptable Worship

Much of the worship recorded in the Bible is either worship of idols or a misguided effort to worship God on human terms. Samuel’s warning to the young and disobedient King Saul stresses the need for preparation of one’s heart. “Does the Lord delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obeying the voice of the Lord? To obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed is better than the fat of rams” (1 Samuel 15:22). The free-thinking preacher of Ecclesiastes warned, “Guard your steps when you go to the house of God. Go near to listen rather than to offer the sacrifice of fools, who do not know that they do wrong” (Ecclesiastes 5:1).

The prophet Isaiah decried the empty and hypocritical worship of his day. “The multitude of your sacrifices—what are they to me?” says the LORD. “I have more than enough of burnt offerings, of rams and the fat of fattened animals; I have no pleasure in the blood of bulls and lambs and goats. When you come to appear before me, who has asked this of you, this trampling of my courts? Stop bringing meaningless offerings! Your incense is detestable to me. New Moons, Sabbaths and convocations—I cannot bear your evil assemblies. Your New Moon festivals and your appointed feasts my soul

hates. They have become a burden to me; I am weary of bearing them. When you spread out your hands in prayer, I will hide my eyes from you; even if you offer many prayers, I will not listen. Your hands are full of blood; wash and make yourselves clean. Take your evil deeds out of my sight! Stop doing wrong..." (Isaiah 1:11-16).

The invasive human carnality that so often eroded the worship of the Old Testament community occasionally spilled over into the New as well. Ananias and Sapphira "lied to the Holy Spirit" (Acts 5:1-11). Simon's greed and lust for power brought a stern rebuke of potentially dire consequences (Acts 8:20). The Corinthians had to cope with divisiveness and party spirit (1 Corinthians 1:10-12), jealousy and quarreling (chapter 5), tolerance of gross immorality (chapter 5), as well as pride, gluttony, drunkenness, and abuse of the poor in the observance of the Lord's Supper (11:17-34). David's cry for purity of heart in worship has a New Testament ring to it: "Who may ascend the hill of the Lord? Who may stand in his holy place? He who has clean hands and a pure heart, who does not lift up his soul to an idol or swear by what is false" (Psalms 24:3,4).

Pentecostal Dimensions of Worship

Many worship practices in the New Testament are decidedly Pentecostal. Paul's oft-cited reminder to the Philippians is foundational: "For it is we who are the circumcision, we who worship (latreuo) by the Spirit of God, who glory in Christ Jesus, and who put no confidence in the flesh." (3:3). "What is most noteworthy in all the available evidence is the free spontaneous nature of worship in the Pauline churches, apparently orchestrated by the Spirit himself."⁹

Acts shows that, from time to time, the Spirit dramatically came upon worshippers (2:4; 4:31; 10:44) with frequent and observable Spirit baptisms accompanied by speaking with other tongues (directly stated or implied) in many settings (2:4; 8:17; 10:44; 19:6). Prophetic messages were common, often supernaturally imparting information and wisdom (11:28; 13:1,2; 20:23; 21:9,10). Signs, wonders, and miracles were by no

means confined to worship gatherings but sometimes did happen in these settings (5:1-11; 20:7-12).

The New Testament letters provide insights into the Pentecostal nature of early worship. In perhaps his earliest letter, Paul admonished, “Do not put out the Spirit’s fire; do not treat prophecies with contempt. Test everything” (1 Thessalonians 5:19-21).

Paul directed believers to “be filled with the Spirit.” Being filled, they were to “speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs (odais pneumatikais). Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord” (Ephesians 5:18,19). Paul also directed similar language to the Colossians: “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs (odais pneumatikais) with gratitude in your hearts to God” (3:16). Scholars have found it difficult to precisely distinguish between psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. Some think all three are charismatic hymnody.¹⁰ At very least, the odais pneumatikais would seem to be something like “singing in the Spirit” (cf. 1 Corinthians 14:15).¹¹ Pneumatikais (“spiritual”) here certainly implies a special work of the Holy Spirit as in “spiritual gifts [charisma...pneumatikon]” (Romans 1:11). Significantly, the only places where the word song (ode) appears, other than the two passages above, is in Revelation where the redeemed are singing in heaven (Revelation 5:9; 14:3; 15:3).

What is often unappreciated is the fact that “the psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs are part of believers’ addressing of one another in the assembly, serving as a means of edification, instruction, and exhortation” (cf. also Colossians 3:16, “teaching and admonishing one another”).¹²

Confronted with the undisciplined exercise of spiritual gifts in Corinth, Paul devoted 1 Corinthians 14 to their exercise and direction. He asserted the value of devotional tongues in private worship (14:2,4,5), and of interpreted tongues in public worship (14:26-28). Prophecies, being readily understood by all, were to be especially valued and prioritized (14:1,3,5,24,25,29-31), a point often missed in contemporary practice where the priority is more often on tongues and interpretation. Paul provided sensible

guidelines for the frequency and testing of both prophecies and “messages” in tongues (14:27-31). He also encouraged broad participation on the part of the congregation in the exercise of a wide range of gifts: “When you come together, everyone has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation” (14:1,5,12,13,26,31). All was to be done in the interest of building up the church (14:5,11,26).

Evidence of Pentecostal worship activity is within other New Testament books. The writer to the Hebrews said of the Lord’s salvation: “God also testified to it by signs, wonders and various miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will” (Hebrews 2:4). The verb expressing God’s testimony is *synepimartyreo*, “to testify at the same time,” and is a present active participle indicating that God is still testifying to His great salvation in Christ. “The present participle... implies that the corroborative evidence was not confined to the initial act of preaching, but continued to be displayed within the life of the community.”¹³ Moreover, “The bestowal of the charismatic gifts (*merismos*) of the Holy Spirit also served to attest the message proclaimed. It is presumably the perpetuation of the charisma in the life of the community (cf. 6:4,5) that provides indisputable evidence of God’s seal upon the word received by the congregation.”¹⁴

The apostle Peter mentioned the Pentecostal dimensions of worship as well. In addressing the use of spiritual gifts—note his use of *charisma*—he directed, “If anyone speaks, he should do it as one speaking the very words of God” (1 Peter 4:11).

Elements of Early Worship Services

From New Testament evidence, it seems likely that early believers integrated many of the practices of the synagogue into their worship. The major elements of the synagogue service and their order are well attested: the Shema [recitation of Deuteronomy 6:4], prayers, Scripture readings, a benediction, and a sermon.¹⁵ Indeed, for a time, Jewish believers and believing proselytes continued to worship in the synagogue before being

excommunicated, or leaving for more commodious settings. New Testament study readily yields at least the following elements of early Christian services:

The Word of God. The reading of the Scriptures was the basic element of synagogue worship services (see Nehemiah 8:8,18; 13:1; Luke 4:16; Acts 13:27; 15:21). This practice was also adopted by the New Testament churches in their worship services. Paul's missionary practice at Thessalonica illustrates: "As his custom was, Paul went into the synagogue, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that the Christ had to suffer and rise from the dead" (Acts 17:2,3). His two years of exposition in Ephesus succeeded in reaching "all the Jews and Greeks... in the province of Asia [with] the word of the Lord" (Acts 19:10). Paul instructed that his letter/s should "be read to all the brothers" (1 Thessalonians 5:27; cf. Colossians 4:16) and encouraged Timothy to devote himself "to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching and to teaching" (1 Timothy 4:13).

Preaching and Teaching. Not only read, the Word of God was regularly preached and taught. The core of the early preaching (kerygma) was the story of Jesus and the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies through His incarnation, ministry, death, and resurrection. The preaching of the cross was central (1 Corinthians 2:2). While we cannot easily separate teaching from preaching, the sermons in Acts and the content of the New Testament letters show us that early teaching (didaskalia) dealt at length with doctrine, including extensive ethical instruction.

Calls for Decision. There is no certain form of altar call in the New Testament, but there are many calls for decision that must not be overlooked. Peter followed his prophetic sermon on the Day of Pentecost with, "Repent... be baptized... And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:38). Stephen called his hearers to account (Acts 7:51-53). The missionary preaching of Paul and Barnabas confronted hearers with the necessity of decision (Acts 13:38-41). The New Testament letters are filled with W. Bromiley, gen. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988). imperative calls for belief and

behavioral change. Even the observance of the Lord's Supper came with a call for self-examination prior to participation (1 Corinthians 11:27-32).

Spirit Baptism. So important is baptism in the Holy Spirit that the Baptist's prophecy of Jesus as the coming Baptizer is included in all four Gospels and repeated by Jesus (Acts 1:5). Early Spirit baptisms were observable, powerful, life-changing events, initially evidenced by the sign of speaking with other tongues. Neither rationalistic reductionism nor sensational emotionalism replicates the vitality and power of the Spirit's work in the Early Church. Peter set the tone, "Repent... be baptized... you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:38). All through Acts and the New Testament letters, a dynamic initial and continuing fullness of the Spirit is regularly taught and assumed.

Early Creeds and Confessions. Many particularly concise and rhythmic passages in the New Testament appear to be creedal statements regularly used for instruction and worship in the early churches. One of the best known is Philippians 2:6-11, which begins, "Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness." Other passages often included are: Luke 1:46-55; John 1:1-18; Romans 10:9; 1 Corinthians 15:3-5; Ephesians 5:14; Colossians 1:15-20; 1 Timothy 3:16; 1 Peter 3:18-22; Revelation 4:8, and Revelation 5:12.¹⁶

Hymnody. Some of the above passages, along with psalms, other hymns composed by believers, and "singing in the Spirit" (1 Corinthians 14:15), seem to have been included in the singing of early Christians. Jesus and His disciples sang hymns (Mark 14:26, par. Matthew 26:30), as did Paul and Silas while in the stocks at the Philippian jail (Acts 16:25). Paul wrote to his churches in the province of Asia that Spirit-filled people could be expected to communicate with and edify themselves and others through "psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs" (1 Corinthians 14:26; Ephesians 5:19; Colossians 3:16; cf. Romans 15:9). Some of this hymnody apparently was composed in advance while much was spontaneous and glossolalic.

Prayer. There are nearly 175 references to pray/er/s in the New Testament. One observes the Christian community gathered in prayer under many circumstances in Acts: in the Upper Room (1:14); at the gatherings of new believers after Pentecost (2:42); in the temple (3:1); under threat of persecution (4:24); by the apostolic leadership (6:4); in seeking and ordaining leaders (6:6); for baptism in the Spirit (8:15); for healing (9:40); and in a host of other circumstances. Paul encouraged the Thessalonians to “be joyful always; pray continually...” (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18). In Ephesians, he admonished, “And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests”(Ephesians 6:18). Fasting was sometimes a part of their times of prayer (Acts 13:2). “Whether set prayers were ever said in the Pauline churches cannot be known; in any case, spontaneous prayer by the Spirit is the norm.”¹⁷

Spiritual Gifts. Paul’s extensive instructions to the Corinthians about spiritual gifts and their proper role in congregational life make it clear that these gifts were a regular part of early worship gatherings (1 Corinthians 12-14). He was concerned to nurture spiritual gifts in the well-established congregation in Rome (Romans 1:11) and had already instructed the Thessalonians they must not “treat prophecies with contempt” (1 Thessalonians 5:20). The writer to the Hebrews reminded his readers of the vital role spiritual gifts played in their history (Hebrews 2:4). Peter reminded his readers that when they spoke via a spiritual gift, they were doing so “as one speaking the very words of God (logia theou)” (1 Peter 4:10,11). The Acts, of course, frequently show spiritual gifts at work in many different congregational and non-congregational settings.

Healing. James wrote in his letter that, when believers fell ill, they were to “call the elders of the church to pray over [them] and anoint [them] with oil in the name of the Lord” (James 5:14). The gifts of healings (the literal rendering of 1 Corinthians 12:9) may be included among the spiritual gifts above and were often evident through the narratives of Acts. But it also seems the church regularly prayed for the healing of its members, whether assured of the manifestation of a spiritual gift or not. Though greatly used by God in miracles of healings, Paul noted on one occasion he had left “Trophimus sick in Miletus” (2 Timothy 4:20).

Offerings. The Early Church brought money regularly to the leaders, probably in the course of their scheduled meetings, to ensure the needs of the community were met (Acts 4:34-37; 5:1,2). The church in Antioch gathered a gift, presumably monetary, to send to their Jerusalem brothers and sisters in a time of famine (Acts 11:29,30). Paul, himself often the recipient of gifts from his churches (Philippians 4:18), instructed the Corinthians, “On the first day of every week, each one of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with his income, saving it up, so that when I come no collections will have to be made” (1 Corinthians 16:2).

The Lord’s Supper. While there are no commands in the New Testament as to how often the Lord’s Supper is to be observed, it was certainly a regular and important part of early worship (cf. Mark 14:22-25; parallels, Matthew 26:17-30; Luke 22:7-23; 1 Corinthians 11:17-34). Early believers “broke bread in their homes and ate together...” (Acts 2:46), the Supper apparently included in some if not all those meetings. Paul’s correctives in 1 Corinthians 11 show that the Lord’s Supper was a regular part of early worship and was often included in a community meal, the Agape (Love) Feast. Paul’s words of institution in 1 Corinthians 11:17-34 represent the earliest written record and explication of the Supper available to us. Paul, followed shortly thereafter by Luke, records the command, “Do this in remembrance of me” (1 Corinthians 11:24,25; cf. Luke 22:19). Paul explained the meaning of the bread and the cup with reference to the Lord’s body and blood (11:24,25) and taught that it was an open proclamation of “the Lord’s death until he comes” (11:26). He called for regular and reverent participation by all believers, after careful self-examination (11:27-32).

Toward a Definition of Worship

Biblical worship has many facets, not all of which can be captured in a brief definition. However, the summation from David Peterson’s study on worship well expresses the findings of this paper.

Throughout the Bible, acceptable worship means approaching or engaging with God on the terms that He proposes and in the manner that He makes possible. It involves honouring (sic), serving and respecting Him, abandoning any loyalty or devotion that hinders an exclusive relationship with Him. Although some of Scripture's terms for worship may refer to specific gestures of homage, rituals or priestly ministrations, worship is more fundamentally faith expressing itself in obedience and adoration. Consequently, in both Testaments it is often shown to be a personal and moral fellowship with God relevant to every sphere of life [*italics ours*].¹⁸

And, capturing the essential dynamic of the Spirit in worship, Peterson adds, "Fundamentally, then, worship in the New Testament means believing the gospel and responding with one's whole life and being to the person and work of God's Son, in the power of the Holy Spirit."¹⁹

Guidance for Contemporary Practice

A number of important inferences and imperatives for the guidance of the church may be drawn from this study. The following are by no means exhaustive:

1. True worship focuses on the Triune God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—as His people praise and glorify Him. Worship is first of all about recognizing God for who He is and what He does. Only secondarily, is it about the worshippers.
2. True worship of God brings a dynamic engagement with the Holy Spirit resulting in the edification of the individual believer and the church as a whole.
3. True worship is a matter of the heart as individual believers develop a lifestyle that confesses and honors God in word and deed everywhere they go.
4. True worship dynamically connects believers through the Spirit to each other and to God's mission to redeem all humankind.
5. Careful attention should be given to the role of, and openness to, the Spirit in all aspects of worship: prayers, music and singing, giving, preaching and teaching, calls for decision, ministry in spiritual gifts, and so forth.
6. Worship planning ought to give attention to the nature and role of the spontaneous spiritual gifts. Careful biblical instruction and loving, sensitive, yet firm guidance with clear explanations to the congregation are needed. Growth strategies that effectively negate the role of particular spiritual gifts in the worship and missional life of the church would appear to be at odds with the essential Spirit dynamic of Christian faith.

7. Worship includes every part of the service from the invocation to the benediction. The joyous praises of music and song are powerful gifts to facilitate the worship of God's people as the Psalms demonstrate. They are not, however, to be considered "the worship" to the exclusion of other parts of the service. Moreover, the music and singing, and other events prior to the preaching, are not "preliminaries." Every element ought to bring praise and glory to God.
8. While a particular individual who leads the music and singing may be designated the "worship leader," the title may be misleading. A better title may be "minister of music," or something similar. Every person who participates in the public leadership of the various parts of the service is, strictly speaking, a worship leader.
9. Since every part of the worship service is to be focused on giving glory to God and presenting His Word for the edification of the church, the entire service ought to be planned and integrated, allowing space in theory and experience for spontaneous work of the Spirit.
10. Similarly, in the interest of diligent instruction in the Word of God, worship planning should be long range and comprehensive so every element is edifying and the major seasons and doctrines of the Christian church are celebrated and explicated in the lives of believers.
11. While the Early Church had powerful preachers such as Paul who, on occasion, held congregations spellbound (Acts 20:7), broad congregational participation by means of spiritual gifts, prayers, songs, giving, and so forth appears to have been the rule.
12. Christian worship merits the best possible technical skills rendered by Spirit-gifted and Spirit-empowered people to glorify God. But the quest for excellence must also be rooted in prayerful humility and dependence upon the Spirit whose purpose it is to energize and lead the entire body in worship.
13. Worship leaders will of necessity be sensitive to the worship forms and musical preferences of those they are presently serving. But they must also prayerfully consider the tastes of those they are attempting to reach. No one standard hymnody, whether traditional, contemporary, or blended, has a divine mandate to reach all persons at all times in all places. Spirit-led worship will be creative in mission, yet respectful of the imperative to "keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace" (Ephesians 4:3).

In all things, to God be the glory.

NOTES

1. Webster's Third New International Dictionary of the English Language, Unabridged, Philip Babcock Gove, ed. (Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster, 2002).
2. For simplicity and consistency, the following Hebrew and Greek terms, their roots, transliterations, definitions, and statistics largely are drawn from the articles "Praise" and "Worship" in Mounce's Complete Expository Dictionary of

Old & New Testament Words, William D. Mounce, gen. ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006).

3. Unless otherwise indicated, biblical quotations are from the New International Version (NIV).
4. Proskyrneo, In The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology, Vol. 2, Colin Brown, gen. ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976), 876.
5. Ibid., 877.
6. See Raymond E. Brown, The Gospel According to John (i-xii); The Anchor Bible (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, 1966), 180; also C. Brown, New International Dictionary, 2:878.
7. C. Brown, Ibid. The quotation is from R. Schnackenburg, The Gospel According to St. John, I (New York: Herder & Herder, 1968), 437.
8. Anthony D. Palma, The Holy Spirit in the Corporate Life of the Pauline Congregation, Th.D. dissertation, Concordia Seminary (1974), 82, citing Oscar Cullmann, Early Christian Worship, trans. A. Stewart Todd and James B. Torrance (London: SCM, 1953), 25.
9. Gordon D. Fee, God's Empowering Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994), 884.
10. James D. G. Dunn, Jesus and the Spirit: A Study of the Religious and Charismatic Experience of Jesus and the First Christians as Reflected in the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 238-239.
11. F. F. Bruce, The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 158-159, 380-381.
12. Andrew T. Lincoln, Word Biblical Commentary, Ephesians, Vol. 42 (Dallas: Word Books, 1990), 345.
13. William L. Lane, Word Biblical Commentary, Hebrews 1-8, Vol. 47a (Dallas: Word Books, 1991), 39.
14. Ibid., 40.
15. "Synagogue," In The New International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, vol. 4, rev. ed., Geoffrey
16. For the listing and examination of these passages, see W. J. Porter, "Creeds and Hymns," in Dictionary of New Testament Background, ed. Craig A. Evans, Stanley E. Porter (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 231-238.
17. Fee, God's Empowering Presence, 866.
18. David Peterson, Engaging With God: A Biblical Theology of Worship (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1992), 283.
19. Ibid., 286.

