

PASTORAL PAPER: AG Reverter Clauses Revised November 4, 2007 (Part 2)

UPDATE, NOVEMBER 2007

At this moment in time I believe that I must revise this article to include some vital updated information that will I believe, shed additional insight into the denominational mindset behind present Assemblies of God policies. In May of 2006 I enjoyed correspondence with then General Secretary George Wood regarding the philosophic underpinnings of our denomination's stand on the actually freedom possessed by local Assemblies of God congregations, after he had received and read his copy of this article, "From Hot Springs to Hot Water".

Friday, May 5, 2006

Dear Jeff,

Thanks for copying me on your paper.

Let me add an additional perspective.

I have never seen a sovereign church attempt to pull out of the Council on its own. The charge is always led by the pastor, who while holding our credential, undermines the commitments he has made by alienating the membership from the AG – or in many cases driving away the AG people and installing a group of his own followers.

My first brush with this came when I was in district office. An elderly minister's wife whose husband had Alzheimer's pled with me to do something to save a church property where the church had voted itself out of the AG. Years earlier, when her children were young, they had sacrificed personal necessities to plant the church, and by the property and put up the buildings. In recent years, a pastor downline from them had managed over time to kick the loyal AG people out of the church and install a small group of his family and friends, keeping membership above 20. Shortly after pulling out they sold the property for over \$1 million, transferring the assets to this "minister's" non-profit "evangelistic" ministry with a board of directors controlled by his family, and used the funds to fund his retirement. The community in which the church is located has no land available today for church development, land is about \$1 million now an acre, and a good Assembly church which could be doing the work of reaching that community, doesn't exist.

In all the years, the General Council has never taken local church property to use for General Council purposes. My experience with districts is the same way. The legal title may say in the trust to the district, but it's actually making sure that the property is always used for the local Assemblies of God congregation.

The Mississippi story you provided only give one side of the story. There is another. But, if that one-sidedness were true, for every story like that I can recite many more where the property was effectively stolen by a disgruntled AG minister – a minister who would have never even been elected pastor without AG credentials, but then used his position to build his own little empire.

In the early days, the Movement was not concerned about such things as they had little property.

The real issue to me has nothing to do with local church sovereignty – churches that pull out are led by unethical ministers who used our credentials and then betrayed the commitments they made.

Thanks for letting me respond in this way!

Blessings!

George Wood

I would like to take just a few lines to analyze some of the highlighted comments made by Brother Wood in this initial response to my paper. First of all, the statement about the District or General Council never seizing a local church property is absolutely true. However, churches never need to be seized when the legal title says, "in the trust of the District". It would be illogical for the Council to take this action since the local church is already an asset that is held in the Fellowship's name. The seizure issue arises when the local congregation attempts to exercise its own local sovereignty by making a decision that is viewed as unfavorable to the District or General Councils' interests. When that happens, the property is not "taken away" as Superintendent Wood asserts, but rather is "protected" from being seized by the local congregation; the group that is supposed to own it in the first place!

In a following paragraph Brother Wood informs me that there is another side to the whole Sandersville, Mississippi situation involving the congregation that was unjustly set upon by that District Council. The only problem is... WHAT IS IT? One of our movement's major weaknesses is the withholding of information with the result that no one ever learns anything. There are so many situations across the United States where "alleged" improprieties have taken place with regards to local congregations and their Districts, but we never gain

any understanding of the historical facts. In most cases they simply just “go away” and are forgotten. I am eternally grateful to God that He included within the witness of His Word, the exact accounts of Apostolic conflicts that took place. We are told explicitly that the disagreement between Saul and Barnabus over whether or not to take John Mark with them on their second missionary journey, was due to the young man’s cowardice during their previous trip. Paul’s confrontation of Peter in front of the entire church in Antioch was completely explained as arising from the “big fisherman’s” hypocrisy towards the Gentile Christians upon the arrival of the Jews from the church in Jerusalem. No loose ends or unexplained conflicts for the sake of political damage control!

Another remarkable statement that soon follows is one that contains the very heart of this issue: “In the early days, the Movement was not concerned about such things as they had little property.” Exactly! The fact that our founding fathers were poor in this world’s goods yet rich in spirit should set the example for all of us, not only when we are “broke”, but also when God’s blessings are outpoured. Who in their right mind would want to put a lien on an Army surplus tent that leaked when it rained, or a rented dance hall that smelled of beer? That is why I demonstrate in “From Hot Springs to Hot Water” that the General Councils following World War II were characterized by an ever-increasing interest in expanding the rights of the General and District Councils to “intervene” in local affairs, while at the same time the local churches, buoyed by post-war prosperity, were building newer and more attractive houses of worship; A collision was inevitable. The old adage still holds true: “If you want to turn someone into a conservative, give them something to conserve.”

The last item I want to address in this section involves the comparison of a variety of ethical actions and their consequences. Superintendent Wood stated, “The real issue to me has nothing to do with local church sovereignty – churches that pull out are led by unethical ministers who used our credentials and then betrayed the commitments they made.” Here is the twisting of the knife. The Mississippi District is portrayed as an innocent party that made a rare mistake, while local churches that choose to exercise their local autonomy are misled and wicked. “Churches that pull out are led by unethical ministers...” That all-encompassing statement reflects the prejudicial attitude that is held towards all churches that leave the denomination. In short: If you leave, you’re crooked and unethical. This negates any serious debate or consideration of legitimate cases.

Dear Brother Wood,

I truly thank you for responding to my inquiry! One of my concerns, as I have been involved even here in Michigan, has been what I have called the “Third Generation Syndrome”. These unethical ministers who did not plant the church or care for it over an extended period of time, have done the very things you cited in your note. This has greatly angered me, and it has cost me “friends”. That is why I have continued to quest after the balance of autonomy and fellowship “Episcopal” oversight (for lack of a better word). At our District a few years ago, just before my term of five consecutive years as sectional Presbyter expired, I went to the microphone because there were many references made to autonomy, the possibility of leaving the fellowship, etc. I asked that it be clearly stated to the council, under what circumstances a local Assembly may withdraw from the General Council. The answer, which is in our District Bylaws, was that with a 100% unanimous vote of the membership in a special meeting, with District representation, etc. The amazing part of the event was that I received slaps on the back from both groups in the council. Some thought I was referring to total local autonomy with right of withdrawal for any reason (a politician’s dream to have both sides of the isle behind you~). My plea was for simple clarity of language. When I sat on the Presbyter board, I watched unethical men have their business meetings under the cover of darkness and then send a “thanks for the memories” letter to the District Office six months after the fact. It turned my stomach then and it still does.

However, if the language of local sovereignty and autonomy is used with reference to true self-determination, then it must extend to the possibility that a local body could possibly make the decision to disfellowship for stated reasons, whether we agree with them or not. Just as an adult child may choose a contrary path, causing Mom and Dad much grief. Once my daughter left home, had her own job and was paying her own bills, she was free to travel, buy and sell, or (God forbid) not come home for Holidays anymore. I trust that the familial bond of love we share will keep her close, even if she should live on the other side of the world.

I have had many conversations, as I know you have, with unsaved people concerning the events of 911. They confront me with the statement “If God is all-powerful, why didn’t He stop those airliners?” My answer has been, “Alright, tomorrow I am sending a truck to your home that will take you and your belongings to a safe house where no terrorist or other calamity will be able to harm you. Don’t worry about the location; that will be decided for you.” “Also, we have a very safe occupation picked out for you where you will always be assured of safety.” The individual looked at me and said, “You can’t tell me where to live, I’m an American? I’m free to live wherever I want to!” I calmly answered, “Make up your mind. Do you want to be free or safe?” He (a very large man) just silently walked away. In the AG family, I believe that we are at a crossroad. My heart is with our great movement, so all is well and safe in Niles, MI (real estate and otherwise). But I do believe that we need to make a huge decision, contained in recorded council minutes, that the churches are free to depart under prescribed guidelines (in Michigan it’s a 100% vote unless the local autonomous church amended the necessary percentage), or that the General Council holds the title deed to all local properties while extending the right of “franchise” to a congregation who still functions in a “three self” manner. What a time in which we live.

Again, I truly appreciate you reply!

Jeff Whittaker

Friday, May 5, 2006. 17:04.

Thanks, Jeff, I appreciate your response.

I guess I see it a little differently than the parent/child analogy. When the child wants to leave home, he or she does not have the right to sell the property of the parents. Most of the people who are in our church have been there less than 10 or 15 years. They are in churches that have been built by persons loyal to the AG. If such a congregation truly wants to leave, then they should be free to leave and make their own sacrifices to buy property and build buildings, and not hijack the investment of the people before them.

I probably react a little more strongly than I ought on this, but I've had to deal with so many unprincipled situations that have a Pauline attitude toward the wolves who prey on the flock.

If such wolves know in advance they cannot take a property, they would have a far less tendency to try to alienate the sheep. In 40 years of ministry, I have yet to discover one AG church that pulled out at the sole initiative of the lay people – at the bottom of it all – either in the lead or behind the scenes pulling the strings – has been the pastor.

Anyway, there's certainly room in the Assemblies of God to debate this matter and hold differences of opinion. I like saying: in essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; and in all things, charity.

Blessings,
George Wood

The first thing that grabs one's attention in Brother Wood's response is his take on the analogy of parenthood. The point I was making was not that the children had the right to take things that belonged to their parents like some drug-crazed rebel that steals from Mom's purse or takes Dad's personal belongings to a pawn shop for some quick money; but rather a mature son or daughter going out and making free will choices that may be contrary to the desires of their parents. My own dear parents raised me, clothed and fed me, and helped educate me. However, when I left home and began supporting myself, they never demanded the right to have their names placed upon the title deeds of my car, house, or other assets for the purpose of insuring that I "voluntarily cooperate" with the family's wishes.

I believe that is why we see so much artificiality in many fellowship districts, along with those who complain quietly in restaurants, offices, and homes, never wanting to raise any questions in public for fear of reprisals. What kind of genuine love and relationship is fostered in that environment? "That's ridiculous!" you say. Let me tell you from personal experience that after sharing with two of my Districts leaders about my current articles, and that I had also sent it along to my then General Superintendent, Thomas Trask. One of my leaders then exclaimed in hushed tones, "You said that (the content of my articles) to Brother Trask? You're going where angels fear to tread!" I need say no more.

We also take notice that, according to Dr. Wood, if someone has only been in a local assembly for 10 or 15 years, this disqualifies them from any consideration for sacrifice or investment. In fact, we must maintain perpetual fidelity to the denomination for the sake of the founders of 1914. This raises the classic debate on schism. "Who moved?" was and remains to be the question asked by Luther, Wesley, and even we today who serve within our given governmental structures. This philosophy demands loyalty to departed saints and denominations, when many of the elders who have "gone on" would not approve of what the movement has become (the late Dr. Opal Reddin, along with many other "elderly" elders who are grieved over the present condition of their beloved fellowship). So the contemporary Assemblies of God congregation finds themselves in the position of being categorized as either "Johnny come latelies" or ungrateful children who steal from their parents, if they (as members of only 10 to 15 years) try to assert local authority over their own property that their spiritual forefathers left behind. Never mind that the first General Council in Hot Springs, Arkansas, was made up of around 300 people (many of whom came from established denominations) who were fiercely dedicated to local sovereignty and avoiding any appearance of the denominationalism and control that Pentecostals had delivered them out of.

Once again we see the harsh tones which are invoked against any who dare to stand up for the rights of the local congregation. "Hijacking the investment" you say? What about preserving it? The true shame is that hundreds of local congregations have no idea that, while using the terminology of "local autonomous Assembly" and "voluntary cooperative fellowship", their local identity has been incrementally eroded away by the steady drip, drip, drip, of resolutions that subtly changed the meaning of terminology within the General Council Constitution and Bylaws until old words have new meanings, and the local Assembly is no longer their own. **IN THE ULTIMATE MEANING OF THE WORD.** For instance, question 105 on the examination for the ordination credential asks the applicant to define "Voluntary Cooperative Fellowship". The correct answer is as follows: "One, of his own free will, decides to become a cooperating member of the fellowship of the Assemblies of God, which cooperation then, is obligatory and not optional". In other words, once your free will has volunteered for fellowship, it is no longer free will but rather legal obligation. The mixing of terminology is what has created both confusion and cynicism. On page 178 of *Assemblies of God History, Missions, and Governance*, (Berean School of the Bible, a division of Global University, Gospel Publishing House, Springfield, Mo. 2005) we see another brief paragraph that demonstrates this tension:

"The discussion of the nature of the local assembly includes a definition of what it means to voluntarily cooperate with the General Council. What a sovereign church freely chooses to affiliate with the Fellowship, it is choosing to be amenable to the General Council. This decision does not diminish the local assembly's sovereignty. Rather, it is the church's commitment to only exercise its sovereignty

in a manner consistent with the principles, beliefs, and expectations of the General Council.”

Do you see the dilemma? We are told that the local assembly’s “sovereignty” is not diminished, BUT only as long as it is expressed in a manner approved by denominational leadership.

The most recent example of this word play can be seen coming out of the most recent General Council held in Indianapolis, Indiana (August 2007). In the original booklet of resolutions up for consideration at the council, the first of thirteen dealt with the subject of the “Nature” of the fellowship. I will include the entire text of the original resolution.

WHEREAS, The Assemblies of God was established as a fellowship of churches; and

WHEREAS, The founding fathers sought to establish a fellowship, not a denomination; and

WHEREAS, It is our desire to reaffirm our true identity; therefore, be it

RESOLVED, That the general Council Constitution, Article II. NATURE, page 80, which reads:

The General Council of the Assemblies of God is a cooperative fellowship based upon mutual agreements voluntarily entered into by its membership.

Be amended by addition so that it will read:

The General Council of the Assemblies of God is a cooperative fellowship based on mutual agreements voluntarily entered into by its membership, and shall be known as The General Council of the Assemblies of God: A Fellowship of Churches.

The question that the student of Assemblies of God history will quickly ask is, “Why do we now, 93 years after our inception, now need to add this silly little clause that has stood so long on its own merits?” Indeed. The answer is found in the fact that our founding fathers knew what they meant, and we can see what they meant when we read a little farther into the General Council Constitution in Article VII.

MEMBERSHIP, Section 1. The General Council of the Assemblies of God. Listen to this crystal clear definition given by original framers of the “Fellowship’s” principle governmental document.

The membership of The General Council of the Assemblies of God shall consist of all ordained and licensed ministers holding a current fellowship certificate and churches holding a Certificate of Affiliation issued by The General Council of the Assemblies of God.

Evidently one of the General or Executive Presbyters of the General Council noticed the flaw in the “new old definition” of what the NATURE of the General Council was and, in meetings held prior to the official beginning of Council in August ’07, amended the amendment by adding the phrase “AND MINISTERS” to the finished product so that it read The General Council of the Assemblies of God: A Fellowship of Churches and Ministers. The dramatic twist is that this “new new” version was presented to the Council on the first day of business in a newly published resolutions booklet that contained OVER TWICE the number of resolutions contained in the original booklet. Also, to save time, it was moved and approved that to help facilitate this immense amount of business, the reading of each resolution would be waved. This too was approved and we quickly moved on. The only problem was that the first two resolutions (including the aforementioned one pertaining to the definition of the NATURE of the Fellowship) were adopted while a significant number of people were still waiting for the new versions that were in the process of being handed out by ushers! When I raised a question from the floor regarding this fact, I was thanked and we moved on.

The original framers of our “Fellowship’s” Constitution never had in mind that the leadership could come in and seize (or “preserve”, depending on your perspective) a sovereign assembly’s assets.... Never.

Here is my next response....

Dear Brother Wood,

I came to shut down my computer after our Friday night service and found your reply! Thanks again for your kind attention. Once again I cannot agree with you more relative to the unscrupulous conduct of self-styled snake oil salesmen who “hijack” churches over which our founding fathers labored. I also see your reasoning behind the “kids cleaning out the parents” analogy relative to moving churches out of the movement. One of the main issues I have argued with these figures has been the one of theology and freedom of practice. None of these men have been able to successfully argue, from a scriptural or historical perspective, a legitimate reason for taking a church out of the AG. We’ve heard all their contrived protests in the name of restoring Apostles and Prophets (Apo\$ta\$y and Profit\$) and a myriad of other reasons, but hey have never been able to challenge (in good conscience) any of the 16 fundamental truths. Their motives have always been revealed.

I also agree that the average congregation is not going to make any move whatsoever without the instigation from their leader. A man with an axe to grind who is only too glad to transfer his offense to his people will always persuade the townsfolk to grab their torches and “head for the castle (headquarters)”. Philosophically, your statement that “If such wolves know in advance they cannot take the property, they would have a far less tendency to try to alienate the sheep” is absolutely true, and would be my argument as well, probably garnering more slaps on the back for me from the denominationally conservative. However, I do believe that we need to be very deliberate about stating this up front. If I went to lead Wesley United Methodist Church in my community, I would be either a fool or a demon (or both) if I thought that I could turn it into “Wesley Community Church” by trying to turn the people’s hearts. Their governmental structure is literally chiseled in stone and provides that “advance knowledge” that protects the denomination from independent charlatans. But, we must ask, will it protect the denomination from itself? If they (or we) change historic doctrines and morays relative to say, homosexuality; then the people would indeed have to leave the deeded property and strike out in faith to a storefront, a theater, etc. Then the debate would ensue as to the subject of who changed. Who is the true schismatic? Is it the modern group? Luther? Wesley? Or is it the institutions that moved from their historic orthodoxy? And if the local properties have been historically referred to as autonomous and sovereign, what is to hinder that same congregation from retaining the ownership of their property in the name of faithfulness to scriptural, historical orthodoxy laid

down by the founders? That is why I believe we need to come out and make a clear statement that applies to all. Some Districts agree with the recommended set of Bylaws listed on the General Council web-site, and some (like Michigan) don't. As long as the Bylaws for autonomous churches allow for a legal exit, then local sovereignty rules the day. In such cases the locals feel they have made a courageous stand for "right" and "the original vision" of the founders, and the denomination protests from a continuity and "sacrifice of the fathers" perspective.

If a pastor or a church signs the dotted line then they should live by it and take their lumps. But it falls to us in leadership to make it absolutely clear to them what they are signing. If it's Michigan, they can leave. If it's Arizona, they can't. Grassroots discussions at both District and General Councils are self-evident indicators that many do not understand which is which. I have personally encouraged credential holders in conversations shared since the General Council in Denver to "stay with us", "pray through", and "communicate with your District Pastors who care about you". Challenging days in the valley of decision.

Here where I belong,

Jeff

Saturday, May 6 2006: 11:56

Jeff,

Thanks again for your quick response. I'm at Dallas airport spending a few moments in between plane changes.

The point you raise about the denomination going astray is a valid one. However, I think that there may be some key differences between the AG and the apostasy in Methodism, the Anglican Movement, etc. Our focus on the Holy Spirit is a vital key that these other denominations lacked.

Over our 92 years of history, the heresy has never been in the General Council, but in breakaway churches. I think the balance is far more weighted in that direction – the local church has a much higher chance of apostasizing than the AG. My concern, therefore, is why in the name of hypothetical future possibility would we want to not focus on the present and very apparent danger?

Blessings!

George Wood

Did you pick up on the distortion of logic in Brother Wood's argument? "Our (the AG) focus on the Holy Spirit is a vital key that these other denominations lacked." Do you see here, that in George Wood's opinion, the other great awakenings and movements of yesterday fell into error because they did not emphasize the Holy Spirit like the AG?! That is amazing, and explains volumes about the spiritual myopia that exists amongst our leaders. The Apostle Paul himself was very concerned about his own ethics and potential for missing the mark, even though he had been taken up into the "third heaven" and shown unspeakable mysteries and "spoke in tongues more than ye all!" But the mighty Assemblies of God doesn't need to worry about repeating the mistakes of other denominations because of glossolalia!

Paul correctly said in 1 Corinthians 10:11-13, 11 Now all these things happened unto them (ancient Israel, but also past movements) for examples: and they are written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the world are come. 12 Wherefore let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall. 13 There hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man: but God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape (honest repentance, discussion, fellowship), that ye may be able to bear it.

Brother Wood,

I am loving this rich discussion, much like your rich expository sermons! I would agree with you totally that there is a world of difference between the AG and the Catholic and Anglican debacles of yesterday. I also stand shoulder to shoulder with you regarding the present questions of isolated apostasy vs. corporate strength and orthodoxy.

Again, the source of my query is not historic or pragmatic, but rather philosophic. When the founding fathers of the United States set out the three branch system, it was not simply for the now, but also for the posterity of the Union. We are still benefiting from their foresight and vision, based not upon simply what King George did, but what a future King George may do after him (no Bush pun intended). I have heard, first in Bible College in Gordon Anderson's Church history class, and many times since, that even the great Methodists began disfellowshipping preachers for preaching out of doors, even though that is how they began. Truly the "Titanics" of the denominational world turn slower than the local church "speedboats" of heresy and personality cults, but they both can sink equally as fast. Once again we arrive at the main question. If the fellowship has changed so much due to its prosperity and growth, demanding new governmental rules of order, let us convene a "continental congress" (maybe we could have it in Philadelphia) and state the historic, theological, and philosophical reasons behind the removal of local ownership of church property, and help renew a singleness of vision that will ensure the physical posterity of the AG, and then through the power of Pentecost, ensure their spiritual posterity as well!

You don't know how blessed I am by your thoughts and words (and prayers),

Jeff

With this exchange our correspondence faded away, concluding with the words of the General Secretary (now General Superintendent), we must "agree to disagree". That is all well and good, except when it means that to disagree over local church autonomy can result in the loss of a local congregation's property. "Oh Lord, please grant your Grace and Wisdom you Your leaders, and courage to every member of every local church to keep "asking, seeking, and knocking" for answers!"