

A FEW FACTS ABOUT WARNER

Because of a lack of information, some have mistakenly supposed that D. S. Warner started, or founded the “Church of God.” That fact is, D. S. Warner was expelled from a group referred to as the “Church of God;” known organizationally as the *General Eldership of the Churches of God in North America*. This group originated from the labors and teachings of John Winebrenner during the years 1825 to 1830, before D. S. Warner was born. John Winebrenner was a dissenter of the German Reformed Church. Of the many other varieties of denominations that afterward sprang up and adopted the name “Church of God” in one form or another, John Winebrenner’s movement was the first and the oldest one on record in America.

As a young Christian convert, D. S. Warner joined this group in the late 1860’s because it bore the scriptural church name (appearing eight times in the New Testament), and because its doctrines and practices were the closest he knew of to what he perceived taught in the New Testament. At that point of his life, he did not yet understand the spiritual aspect of the church being gathered, led, and organized by the Holy Spirit. He became a licensed preacher in that Church of God denomination and was instrumental in bringing many converts into it and raising up several congregations. But the reception of clearer light regarding the true way of the Lord, and walking in that light, got him into trouble with the Church of God he had come to love.

D. S. Warner’s expulsion from that group came about in the late 1870’s as the result, in part at least, of a close friendship he developed with a Baptist minister named C. R. Dunbar. Little did he realize that through this friendship the providence of God was directing him to a great work for the future. C. R. Dunbar was also a member of the National Association for the Promotion of Holiness (first called National Camp Meeting Association) formed in 1867. It was an interdenominational association open to ministers of all denominations with a primary focus of stimulating Christian piety and to counteract worldliness and corruption that was making inroads into the popular institutional churches. It organized local associations wherever possible, and out of these several new denominations were organized, such as Pilgrim Holiness and the Church of the Nazarene.

Some of the outstanding traits of D. S. Warner’s character were his absolute honesty, his willingness to consider any doctrinal issue with an unbiased and open mind, his total reliance on the Word and Spirit of God for guidance in all matters of doctrine, and his ***readiness to acknowledge truth wherever and in whomever it might be found. He was totally unsectarian in heart.*** His Baptist friend, C. R. Dunbar, and other members of the holiness movement, whom he recognized as good brethren in Christ, instructed him regarding the doctrine of holiness, or *entire sanctification*, as a deeper work of the Holy Spirit, available to Christians through faith, following the initial work of justification and regeneration. Although he at first thought these people were in error on this point of doctrine, yet he recognized it was producing very good fruit in their lives. How could an erroneous doctrine produce good fruit? After all, the Bible says, “Either make the tree good, and his fruit good; or else make the tree corrupt and his fruit corrupt: for the tree is known by his fruit.” Matt. 12: 33. Obviously, the true character of any doctrine can be

clearly seen in the kind of fruit it produces in those who embrace it. D. S. Warner could not deny that his friends in the holiness movement were bearing the *real fruit of the Spirit* and, in fact, to a greater degree than any other class of professed Christians he had ever met.

After carefully and prayerfully scrutinizing their teachings regarding sanctification, D. S. Warner became fully convinced that they were right on this point of doctrine. Therefore, he fully embraced it and extended to them his right hand of fellowship. Because of this, he was tried and declared guilty of “heresy” by his fellow elders in the *General Eldership of the Churches of God in North America*.

After his expulsion from the Winebrennerian Church of God, D. S. Warner became a prominent figure in the holiness movement. Charles Ewing Brown, a 20th century theologian and church historian, says on pages 101 and 102 of his historical treatise, *When the Trumpet Sounded*: “Warner himself, after he left the Winebrennerians, became quite a leader in the holiness movement. There is extant a record of the proceedings of the Western Union Holiness Convention held at Jacksonville, Illinois, December 15 – 19, 1880, which names Warner in several places. For instance, he was a member of the program committee appointed at that meeting. The minutes also contain the text of an address which he delivered to the convention, entitled ‘The Kind of Power Needed to Carry the Holiness Work.’ ... To this meeting came delegates from several states, including Indiana, Illinois, Minnesota, Iowa, Kansas, Nebraska, Missouri, and Kentucky. Peter A. Juhlin, lately from Sweden, reported the work of holiness as prospering among the Swedish Methodists. There were present approximately 220 delegates. Most of them were listed under Methodist Episcopal. There were also Presbyterian, Cumberland Presbyterian, Baptist, Evangelical, Free Methodist, Missionary Baptist, Freewill Baptist, Christian, United Brethren, Congregationalist, YMCA, Wesleyan, Methodist Episcopal Church South, Salvation Army, and four Church of God delegates present, besides a few who marked themselves as ‘Cast-Out Synagogue.’ D. S. Warner was listed as from the Church of God, and the man who became an early associate [of D. S. Warner after he began publishing *The Gospel Trumpet*], namely Jeremiah Cole, was listed under Methodist Episcopal.” [Words in brackets added by Harlan Sorrell].

The Holiness Association had a profound affect on the members of many denominations. Many earnest Christians who were hungering and thirsting for God’s fullness in their hearts and lives were “obtaining the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ through sanctification of the Spirit and belief of the truth” (2 Thes. 2: 13-14). And as a result of the hallowing presence and anointing of the Spirit in their hearts, which naturally gives sanctified souls divine insight and spiritual understanding (1 John 2: 20,27), they were also brought into an awareness of the spiritual deadness and shallowness of the denominations they were in, and how far short these humanly organized religious systems were of being like the divine Church taught in the Scriptures. The Holy Spirit began to enlighten the minds of many to the fact that the real Church is not any such thing as a denominational body but is rather the divine body of Christ in which all those who are saved in Christ have obtained membership by virtue of salvation and are brought together “to drink into one Spirit” (1 Cor. 12: 13).

It was out of the holiness movement that a great revival and “come-out” message was born. Many began to feel that the Holiness Association itself was too denominationally oriented. In many cases it encouraged or *required* adherence to some denominational organization. Those who became so brave as to renounce and sever their ties with denominational organizations became known as “Come-outers.” Among them was D. S. Warner. It was in the midst of this great spiritual revival and awakening to the evils of denominationalism that D. S. Warner began publishing his anti-sectarian holiness journal in January of 1881, which he named *The Gospel Trumpet*. He was at that time, however, still connected with the Holiness Association. But within a few months after starting *The Gospel Trumpet* publication, he felt led by the Spirit of God to sever his connection with the Association. He gives his reasons for doing so in the June 1, 1881, issue:

“Saturday, April 22, the hand of the Lord was heavily upon our soul, had no relish to converse with any one but God. Finally in company with two brethren we went into the house of God at Hardinsburg, Indiana, and placed ourselves under the searching eye of God, when the Spirit of the Lord showed me the inconsistency of repudiating sects and yet belonging to an association that is based upon sect recognition. We promised God to withdraw from all such compacts. But being dearly attached to the holiness work, we attended the Association at Terre Haute, and tried to have the sect-endorsing clause removed from the constitution. Its substance is as follows, speaking of local associations:

“‘It shall consist of members of various Christian organizations and seek to work in harmony with all these societies.’

“We offered the following substitute: ‘It shall consist of, and seek to cooperate with, all true Christians everywhere.’

“We had supposed that fellowship and cooperation should not exclude any person or truth that is in Christ Jesus, and that we should not be compelled to bow down to anything not in, nor of, Christ Jesus.

“We were positively denied membership on the ground of not adhering to any sect. And now we wish to announce to all that *we wish to cooperate with all Christians, as such, in saving souls – but forever withdraw from all organisms that uphold and endorse sects and denominations in the body of Christ.*”

The clear, definite, radical tone of *The Gospel Trumpet* became a great attraction to spiritual people everywhere. Multitudes of Christians became convicted of the pure Bible truth it taught, consecrated themselves to God unreservedly, and came out of their denominations, taking the Word and Spirit of God as their only guides. Along with all other scriptural terms relative to the Church as the spiritual body of Christ, these “Come-outers” also accepted the scriptural appellation “Church of God” (but not with denominational connotations). The following quotes from various historians shed much light on their application of the term “Church of God.”

“D. S. Warner’s Church of God carried the nonsectarian traditions of the holiness revival to such extremes that he rejected entirely the idea of an organized denomination. Local congregations kept no membership records and were bound to others only by the

fellowship of the Spirit. The founder believed that he was commissioned to unite all Christians on the basis of Jesus' prayer recorded in the Gospel of John, chapter seventeen, "Sanctify them ... that they all may be one."

– Excerpted from *Called Unto Holiness* (Kansas City, MO: Nazarene Publishing House, Copyright 1962). Used by permission in Barry Callen's "A Time to Remember – Beginnings," page 15.

"This Church of God does not regard itself as a denomination but as a movement within the church universal to restore Christian unity on a scriptural basis. It does not keep membership lists but believes that all Christians are by virtue of their faith and experience members of the true church of God."

– *The Small Sects in America*, by Elmer T. Clark, Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 49-10200.

"At the outset D. S. Warner was opposed to any kind of organization. ... Ministerial meetings were called casually without any organization, and the publishing work was operated by private persons and not as an organization controlled by the church."

– *When the Trumpet Sounded*, by Charles Ewing Brown, page 94.

"Those who followed him (D. S. Warner) rejected all creeds, recognized 'the Lord's people' in all denominations, and sought to bring about the identity, or at least the possible identity, of the visible and the invisible church."

– Excerpted from *Christianity in a Revolutionary Age*, Vol. III (New York: Harper and Row, Inc., Copyright 1961). Used by permission in Barry Callen's "A Time to Remember – Beginnings," page 26.

"The most important message was that Christ built the church and we are members of it. There is no joining in God's church, all saints are one and we should recognize all saints. ... The theory back there was that everybody saved belongs to the church."

– A quote from J. N. Richardson in *Church of God History in South-Central Missouri*, by Barbara Crouch, page 13.

Although D. S. Warner's concept of church organization has been viewed as "extreme" by some and as impractical by others, it nevertheless has yet to be proven unscriptural! He was thoroughly convinced that "except the Lord build the house (church), they labor in vain that build it" (Psa. 127:1), and that the real Church can only increase by the increase of God (Col. 2: 19). He believed that any religious system organized or directed by human wisdom is a substitution of the divine ministration of the Holy Spirit and is doomed to corruption and failure. In the Feb. 17, 1887, issue of *The Gospel Trumpet*, D. S. Warner replied as follows to one who asked him, "Have you no organization?" He answered: "We have none that we call ours. But God has one which He bought, built, and organized Himself, into which we are happy to have been organized, or builded together through the

Spirit.” Then he proceeds to give scriptural proof that this is the only kind of organization God recognizes.

It is clear in studying the New Testament that the apostolic church “kept no membership records and were bound to others only by the fellowship of the Spirit.” (See 1 Corinthians chapter 12, Ephesians 2: 18-22 and 4: 1-16.) Thus D. S. Warner’s concept of a theocratically organized church, owned by God and governed and directed by His Son, Jesus Christ, through the agency and ministration of the Holy Spirit was nothing more or less than the true scriptural ideal. He believed Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit to be competent enough to perform their administrative functions in “fitly framing and joining and compacting” all the members of His body, the Church. But he also recognized that this is only made possible when we, as members in particular, present our own bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God (Rom. 12: 1), and thus allow the Holy Spirit to take full control of every aspect of our lives. Therefore, he taught that *entire sanctification (not just in theory, but in practical reality) is the basis and the secret of perfect unity among believers*. He was convinced that wholly sanctified people naturally give up denominational affinities, and all other divisional and carnal elements, because of the love of God shed abroad in their hearts by the Holy Ghost (Rom. 5: 5), and that by the unifying bond of the Spirit they are able to “come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ” (Eph. 4: 13). He believed that every element that is foreign to Christ and the Holy Spirit is no part of the “church of God, which He purchased with His own blood” (Acts 20: 28), and that the whole New Testament system operates on the basis of intimate personal relationship with Christ – Christ being all and in all (Col. 3: 10-11; Eph. 1: 22-23; 4: 6); that God Himself places the members in His body as it pleases Him (1 Cor. 12: 18), and that the members only recognize one another through spiritual kinship in Christ (2 Cor. 5: 16-17, Rom. 8: 9).

The church historian and theologian, Charles Ewing Brown, says:

“As a matter of historic fact, D. S. Warner stood rather in the historic tradition of radical Christianity, extending from the dissidents from Roman Catholicism in the eleventh century down through the Anabaptists into the radical Christianity of modern times. It was with this school of historic Christianity that Warner had deepest affinity. ... Actually, as the historian of theology can show, every doctrine *save one* which D. S. Warner taught had been taught in large groups of Christians at one time or another throughout Christian history. ... Men like Luther, Wesley, and other reformers did not introduce novelties into the church’s theology. They set old and neglected truth in a fresh, new light. They changed the arrangement of some themes and placed fresh emphasis upon old and forgotten truths. This is what Warner did.

“In a foregoing paragraph we reserved *one point* of Warner’s teaching as a novelty. This was his doctrine concerning the identity, or at least the possible identity, between the visible and invisible church. When we say that the doctrine of the identity of the visible and invisible church is a novelty, we mean *in modern theological thinking*. ***It was the doctrine of the church during the first century that the normal church is both visible and***

invisible at the same time. In my book *The Apostolic Church* I have given Adolf Harnack, the famous German Protestant church historian, as authority for this statement. It is easy for the historical student to verify this assertion by study of the ancient patristic literature.

“Numerous authorities concur in the statement that Augustine was the first authoritative writer in the church who drew the distinction between the visible and the invisible church, and this he did to contrive a defense against the Donatists, a widespread sect of his time and country who said that the Catholic Church could not be the church of God because it was composed so largely of sinners. Augustine countered this attack by the defensive claim that there was a visible and an invisible church, and many false professors had found their way into the visible church.

“When the Protestant reformers were accused of dividing the church they fell back upon the arguments of Augustine and maintained that they had divided the visible church only but had done no injury to the unity of the invisible church of Christ. From that time forward the doctrine of a visible and invisible church was prominent in Protestantism, being regarded as one of its foremost dogmas, since upon it rested the primary defense against the charges of Roman Catholicism concerning dividing the church.

“In the beginning of the Friends movement under George Fox there was for a short time a vision and acceptance of the principle of the identity of the visible and invisible church, and the Quakers practiced this doctrine for a short time. It was not long, however, until the exigencies of their struggles with the courts, their persecutions, and their efforts to hold property and carry on Christian work caused them to drop this doctrine. Warner preached this doctrine assiduously from the first issues of *The Gospel Trumpet* throughout his life.

“While D. S. Warner spent a great deal of time in a fresh study of Christian doctrine from the Bible direct, it must be repeated that he was not a technical theologian, neither was he a dogmatist. In fact, the chief accent of his preaching was not a dogmatic and didactic, but evangelical and evangelistic. In other words, he was more interested in getting people saved, sanctified, and healed of their afflictions than in any other aspect of his work. He was concerned about the doctrine of the church and the great principles of Christian living, not because he was obsessed with a theory, but *because he believed that the doctrine of a pure church intelligently preached and earnestly practiced would actually tend to the salvation of souls and the increase of the kingdom of God.*”

– Excerpted from *When the Trumpet Sounded*, pages 83 – 87.

So, D. S. Warner did not or initiate, establish, or found the Church of God. Neither did he initiate the Evening Light Reformation movement. It was the moving of the Spirit of God upon many hearts hungering and thirsting for righteousness that created the quest for holiness and unity found in Jesus Christ. A. L. Byers says:

“For a proper representation everything depends upon the understanding of, and the attitude toward this great movement. For any body of people to hold that the reformation is entrusted to them, or that they have become the standard for the world, is a self-centered attitude, vastly different from that which regards the reformation as something

prophetically due, as having come independent of man, and as being greater than the people who have been favored with its light, and that it is their part to conform to *it* in principle, doctrine, and everything. The great movement is in the world, and any attempt to ‘corner’ it or to limit it to a particular body of people could only result in making that body a sect, or faction, while the movement itself would proceed independently. **The true spirit of the reformation will be, however, with those who measure to its standard, whether they be few or many, and God will manifest himself accordingly.”**

– *Birth of a Reformation*, page 28.

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