

Watchman Fellowship Profile

The Church of God in Christ, Mennonite

By Will Stoppel

FOUNDER: John Holdeman

DATE: April 1859

PUBLICATIONS: *The Messenger of Truth*, the official bi-monthly publication. *Conference Reports*, the official rulebook updated each 5-10 years.

HEADQUARTERS: Moundridge, Kansas

COMMON TERMS: One True Visible Church, Unbroken Lineage of Unchanged Faith, United and Undivided Church of God, and Faith Once Delivered to the Saints.

HISTORY

The Church of God in Christ, Mennonite (hereafter referred to as CGCM) was one of several off-shoots of the (Old) Mennonite Church. During the religious fervor of the 1800's when men who believed they had received a call from God were founding new denominations, John Holdeman also believed he had been called. Through dreams and visions, he believed he was chosen to cleanse, not only the Mennonite Church, but the Church at large. Because of his youth—he was in his early twenties—and his authoritative style of denouncing what he believed was decay in the Mennonite Church, the leadership did not take him too seriously. He was never ordained, nor even asked to preach in their assemblies.

Frustrated that his elders would not listen to his repeated opinions, John Holdeman split off from his Wayne County, Ohio congregation with his father and two others.¹ He ordained himself and established what he claimed was a restoration of the One True Visible Church. Claiming a lineage of the true church through history, he believed his group now held the only candlestick and was the only possessor of all truth.² He believed all other churches had been established to the displeasure of God.³

Holdeman's preaching gathered only 150 converts in twenty years. His own mother never joined, despite Holdeman's prophecy that she would,⁴ and only one of his children was faithful to John's church. The new denomination may have died out like other spin-off groups during that era but for an influx in 1878 of immigrants from Russia that boosted the membership. As of 2002 this group numbers 19,278, with almost 90% in the United States and Canada.

DOCTRINES

The Church of God in Christ, Mennonite, stands apart from other Mennonite and Anabaptist-heritage groups both in fellowship and in certain doctrines.

GOD: The Holdemans believe in a triune God, but they deviate from historic Christianity by denying that Christ assumed real human flesh from his mother Mary. Holding to the Christology of Menno Simons in the sixteenth century, they state that Christ was true God and true man, but they reject the actual meaning of the hypostatic union or two natures of Christ. Their definition of "true man" is not the same as "true human being." Though Holdeman wrote Jesus was born and died as, or like, a human, members are cautioned against thinking of Jesus as a true human.⁵ They also embrace one of

the tenets of the ancient view of Docetism fought by the early church Fathers. This view held that Jesus' body was not actually human flesh, but rather was a specially prepared spiritual flesh that only resembled humanity.⁶ The CGCM teaches that Jesus was merely incubated within Mary, taking no flesh from her and having no genetic connection to the human race.⁷ Holdeman also taught a contradictory view of the deity of Christ, stating that Jesus is God, nevertheless Christ is brought into existence in eternity through a "three-fold birth."⁸

SALVATION: The CGCM teaches that humanity is born in sin and that the solution is faith in the substitutionary death of Christ. They speak of salvation by grace through faith and do proclaim a spiritual rebirth. However, the emphasis upon works as a requirement of salvation results in a form of legalism.⁹ Converts commonly testify that after surrendering all to God, they don't receive the peace of salvation until they make apologies or destroy some forbidden objects. One of their tracts, "Security in Christ," states "Jesus insists that His commands be fully obeyed in our lives if we are to claim our sonship to Him."

Another tract lists the steps to salvation as being conviction, sorrow, confession of sin, belief, restitution, obedience, and transformation. Converts are encouraged to publicly share their lives and spiritual experiences to confirm and reinforce a genuine new birth experience before baptism. Their testimonies usually recite condemnation, surrendering all to God, and making confessions and restitution before receiving peace.

For church members, this obedience requisite for salvation includes obedience to their mandatory¹⁰ *Conference Reports* rulebook and ministers' councils, which prohibit shaving the beard; women appearing in public with uncovered heads, wearing slacks or jewelry (including wedding rings); owning two-colored vehicles, musical instruments, tape recorders, photographs, or radios; voting or serving in the military or any public office; attending high school or college; buying stocks and bonds or life insurance; and going to fairs, circuses, or amusement parks.

Articles in their official periodical also add instructions as detailed as where one may part the hair, what type and color of shoe may be worn, and what type of ring pattern one's cell phone should have. Continued disobedience in any area is viewed as lack of submission and will eventually bring church discipline and excommunication, which is viewed as loss of salvation.

BELIEF IN THE CHURCH: The cornerstone doctrine of the CGCM is that it alone is the "One True Visible Church" on earth. Members believe that Christ has "other sheep which are not of this fold," i.e. Christians who are not part of the church, the Body of Christ, or the Bride of Christ. They call these "Kingdom Christians,"¹¹ but do not consider them brothers and sisters in Christ.

Members of the CGCM also believe that a Christian who comes in contact with their church and becomes accountable through the Holy Spirit is disobeying God if he does not join their group.¹² He will eventually lose his salvation if he remains in his former church.¹³

The CGCM believes that their church alone as the ground and pillar of the truth "is the supreme judge in all gospel matters" and has the authority to interpret Scripture.¹⁴ Much emphasis is put on submission to the ministry and to the collective conscience of the group, called "laying down my light for the light of my brethren." To question group decisions or practices is labeled divisive. Independent thought, personal understanding of Scripture, or disagreement with any of the church's doctrines can bring the very serious charge of deception, pride, heresy, and a foreign spirit. Members are directed not to listen to any "seducing spirits," i.e., anyone attempting to point out error in Holdeman doctrine.

The Holdemans' extremely successful uniformity is achieved through enforced "blending." In addition, allegiance to all the officially interpreted doctrines is mandatory before partaking of Communion and is expressed in the required public declaration, "I am at peace with God and man. I love [or agree with] the Church and her doctrines."¹⁵

EVIL SPIRITS: Having an evil spirit is frequently spoken of in the CGCM. One can be accused of having a lying spirit, an independent spirit, a self-seeking spirit, an Internet spirit, a recreation spirit, a casual spirit, a fault-finding spirit, an intellectual spirit, a lawyer spirit—and many others. The type of spirit does not always have to be defined, for

members can even be told, "Everything in your life seems in order, but we just feel in you a foreign spirit." Disharmony with any of the rules or doctrines results in an automatic diagnosis of an evil spirit, which is the most common reason given for discipline.¹⁶

EXCOMMUNICATION AND SHUNNING: Excommunication is one of the important practices of the CGCM. Often the fact that the group diligently practices excommunication and shunning is pointed to as being proof that they are the One True Church.

Fellowship with The Church is considered synonymous with fellowship with God. Once a person is baptized into their group, he is not allowed to withdraw without being excommunicated and shunned for life by friends and family members. Members are taught that anyone who is excommunicated from their church is lost¹⁷ and can never be reconciled to God unless he or she repents and reunites with their church, no matter how many years he lives his Christian life in another church.¹⁸

It is estimated that 10-25% who have been raised in the church experience excommunication, but 75-80% of those eventually return.¹⁹ Of the outsiders who join "from the world," 95% leave never to return.

BIBLICAL RESPONSE²⁰

1. **Christology: The two natures of Christ and the Eternal Son.** A cardinal doctrine of the Christian faith is that in the one Person of Jesus Christ, through the incarnation two natures were united. One, the nature of perfect humanity, and the other the nature of deity (Hebrews 2:14-17; Galatians 4:4; Rom 1:3; Acts 2:29-30; John 7:42). This is known as the hypostatic union. When the eternal Word took a human nature at the incarnation (John 1:14) the Son took a real human nature including human flesh. The Son has existed from all eternity with the Father and the Holy Spirit (John 1:1; 8:58).

2. **Unity of the Body of Christ.** The New Testament speaks of the unity of all believers in Jesus Christ: "All that in every place call upon the name of the Lord" (1 Corinthians 1:2) "are the body of Christ" (12:27). The Bible says all who have faith in Christ are overcomers (1 John 5:5) whose names are written in the Lamb's Book of Life (Revelation 3:5). All whose names are written in the Lamb's Book of Life are part of the bride of Christ (Revelation 21:27).

3. **Authoritarianism and Legalism.** Scriptural teaching is clear that salvation comes by God's grace through faith in Jesus death and resurrection, and that this is the gospel (1 Corinthians 15:1-8). The good works believers perform are done in thankfulness and obedience to Christ in response to saving faith and not the means to earn or retain God's free gift of salvation (Ephesians 2:8-10). The New Testament speaks strongly against legalism (Titus 1:10-14; Galatians 2:4; 5:1,4; Colossians 2:5,8).

¹ John Holdeman in his letter to Bishop Shaum, *A History of the Church of God*, 125. (Note: All references are published or have been sold by Gospel Publishers, the publishing arm of the Church of God in Christ, Mennonite in Moundridge, Kansas.)

² *Ibid.*, 189. See also John Holdeman, *Mirror of Truth*, 84.

³ *Ibid.*, 30

⁴ (Letter from Holdeman to George Shaum March 17, 1885, a copy was placed in the files of Mennonite Library Archives, Bethel College, Newton, KS). Cf. Deut. 18:22.

⁵ *Messenger of Truth*, August 2002, 7.

⁶ *Messenger of Truth*, August 2002, 5.

⁷ *Bible Doctrines and Practices*, 40.

⁸ Holdeman, *Mirror of Truth*, 36.

⁹ *Bible Doctrines and Practices*, 113-14.

¹⁰ *Conference Reports*. Article 6, November 1974.

¹¹ *Bible Doctrines and Practices*, 169.

¹² Holdeman, *A History of the Church of God*, 188.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 188. See also *Bible Doctrines and Practice*, 169.

¹⁴ *The Confession of Faith and Minister's Manual*, 38.

¹⁵ *The Confession of Faith and Minister's Manual*, 66.

¹⁶ *Bible Doctrines and Practice*, 187.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 189.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 190.

¹⁹ *Mennonite Encyclopedia* vol. 5 (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press), 154-157.

²⁰ Additional documentation and an expanded response can be found at <http://www.theholdemans.com>. Additional resources are available from this website as well.

RESOURCES

Vital Christology Issues, Roy B. Zuck, General Editor. Essays by some of the best Evangelical scholars cover the whole range of biblical disclosure on the Savior. Articles cover the preexistence of Christ and the angel of the Lord in the Old Testament. There is a thorough discussion of Gospel and Pauline revelations, as well as Jesus in Revelations. 171 pgs., Notes. **\$13**

The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse by D. Johnson & J. VanVonderen. Churches are meant to be safe places where spiritual leaders help their members. However, some have become places of spiritual abuse, where leaders dominate others. Through subtle uses of misinterpretation, the church can become a place of legalism, guilt and spiritual enslavement. This book will shed much light on these abusive processes, 235 pgs. **\$12**

Damaged Disciples by Ron & Vicki Burks. The shepherding movement, which is growing among many nontraditional Christian groups, robs the personhood of the believer by demanding total submission to a spiritual "master." The Burks explain the destructive effects that shepherding had on their lives, and assist pastoral and professional counselors to help victims of such abuse, 176 pgs. **\$14**

Healing Spiritual Abuse by Ken Blue. Even though church leaders are supposed to be servants to the body of Christ, some use their positions to dominate. They refuse to allow any questions concerning their teachings and demand total surrender to their authority. This book helps victims of such spiritual abuse to heal, and shows Christian leaders how to avoid abusive patterns, 166 pgs., Endnts. **\$11**



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