

## Gospel Assembly Church

By Travis S. Kerns

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**Founder:** William J. Sowders (1879-1952)

**Founding Date:** 1914

**Official Publications:** *The Gospel of Peace* (quarterly magazine published by the Des Moines, Iowa Gospel Assembly Church)

**Organizational Structure:** individual churches are governed via the congregational form of church government; local pastors hold complete authority over their respective congregations

**Other names:** Gospel of the Kingdom, Christian Assembly Church, Body of Christ, Body of Jesus Christ, The Body

### HISTORY<sup>1</sup>

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The founder of the Gospel Assembly Church, William J. Sowders, was born on September 13, 1879 in Louisville, Kentucky. He served on the Louisville Police force during his early years but became disillusioned with police work after a raid that he was part of, revealed his Police Chief was involved in illegal gambling. Sowders moved to Illinois and settled in a small town called Olmstead. He soon discovered that a nationwide, charismatic revival was taking place and began searching for a local pastor who could introduce him to this revival. His search led him to Bob Shelton, a charismatic revivalist, who would later become an integral piece of the theological foundation of the Gospel Assembly Church.

After Sowders received the baptism of the Holy Spirit, he joined Bob Shelton and George Aubrey on their "Gospel Boat," anchored in Paducah, Kentucky. One day, while preaching on the "Gospel Boat," Sowders heard a voice from heaven, a voice he believed was God's. The voice exclaimed to Sowders, "I want you to do something. Son, I want you to preach MY GOSPEL [emphasis original]."<sup>2</sup> After hearing this voice and preaching his distinct gospel, Sowders began to realize that his doctrine was much different than that which was accepted by other preachers of his time. He deduced that "MY GOSPEL" was a restoration of early church teaching which had fallen away during the dark ages.

Established denominations did not receive Sowders' preaching or doctrine well, thus he began holding his meetings at local campgrounds beginning in 1914. The campground meetings included numerous charismatic experiences and several out-of-body episodes. These meetings proved to be foundational for Sowders and the Gospel Assembly Church. Campground meetings are still held by the Church at least biannually, including large meetings at the Church-owned Shepherdsville Campground in Shepherdsville, Kentucky.

After the campground meetings began to rise in popularity, Sowders noticed that regular attendees were becoming the norm. So, Sowders moved back to Louisville, Kentucky in the fall of 1927 and erected a large tent on Northwestern Parkway. Due to the large number of people attending the meetings held at this new location, Sowders moved to a rented store building within the city limits of Louisville's downtown district. As the number of attendees continued to increase, he again moved the meeting location to a building which could easily seat over 1,000 congregants. He ministered at this location until his death in 1952.

After Sowders' death, Thomas M. Jolly took charge of the growing Church. Even though Sowders had chosen him as his successor, Jolly never experienced the same

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success as his predecessor. In fact, during Jolly's tenure as leader, the Church split a number of times, leaving the main group dismantled and without a campground in Shepherdsville (the group of trustees in control of the Shepherdsville Campground refused to follow Jolly's leadership and seized control of the Campground from the Church). In 1965 Jolly led his church and twelve other congregations to split from the larger portion of Sowders' original movement. This group remained under Jolly's control until 1992 when Jolly resigned his leadership position due to numerous lawsuits charging him with sexual misconduct. Though Jolly had left the larger fellowship, there remained strong leadership within the larger group. One of those leaders was Lloyd L. Goodwin.

Prior to Jolly's split with the larger fellowship, he sent Lloyd L. Goodwin to a small church in Des Moines, Iowa. Though Jolly and Goodwin were friends in the ministry, Goodwin did not follow Jolly when he split in 1965. In the early 1970s however, Goodwin began encountering stress with other leaders within the larger fellowship because the others discarded many of his doctrinal teachings, teachings Goodwin believed had been revealed to him by God. By 1996, Goodwin was the recognized leader of the Gospel Assembly Church, which had now grown to be a large, worldwide fellowship found in more than 100 countries in thirty nations on six continents. Goodwin remained pastor of the Des Moines, Iowa Gospel Assembly Church, the de facto lead congregation, until his death in 1996.

After Lloyd Goodwin died, his brother Vernon Goodwin was appointed as the new pastor of the Des Moines Church. Vernon did not have a long ministry; he died shortly after in November, 1997. Though the time of his leadership was brief, he did see a beginning of the healing [of the splits], with increasing communication and fellowship between the various divisions of the movement that originated with William Sowders. Ministers from different divisions reacted warmly to Brother Vernon Goodwin's charitable spirit.<sup>3</sup> At Vernon's death, his son Glenn was appointed pastor of the Des Moines Gospel Assembly Church, and remains at that position at the time of this writing.

## **BELIEFS<sup>4</sup>**

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**Scripture:** The Gospel Assembly Church claims that the Bible is their only authority (*sola scriptura*). This is referenced again and again in their Church literature and publications. The revelations offered by Sowders and others are not viewed as new scripture; they simply constitute new interpretations of Scripture. Glenn Goodwin writes,

...we do base our beliefs, not on what some man has taught in the past, but upon our present understanding of the Bible. We believe in *sola scriptura*. We have modified doctrinal positions over time, as we have developed a clearer understanding of the Word of God. We base our beliefs on the entire volume of truth. Scripture must be interpreted by Scripture. Verses must be compared to others verses.<sup>5</sup>

**God:** The Gospel Assembly Church believes God to be absolutely sovereign, arguing that,

all events, small and great, come about as the result of God's decree. The Ruler of the universe actually rules His creation. God not only knows the future; He decrees it . . . no one can interfere with God's plan in the life of any person . . . God cannot fail.<sup>6</sup>

God is also eternal. He is not a created being and is the only uncreated and self-sustaining being in the universe.

The Gospel Assembly Church does not however, support the historic, orthodox doctrine of the Trinity. During his early ministry, William Sowders encountered two groups, Trinitarians and Oneness Pentecostals. As explained by Lloyd Goodwin, these two groups held opposing beliefs concerning the godhead:

Those who believe in the doctrine of the trinity hold to the position that there are three persons in the Godhead: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. These three persons are distinct one from another; three Gods – yet only one God. The Scriptures

do not bear this out. Those who believe in the doctrine of oneness hold to the opinion that there is only one person in the Godhead. Not three – only one. Their position is that – Jesus is God. Here again this position is not scriptural.<sup>7</sup>

Sowers proposed a mediating position:

As Brother Sowers studied and prayed over [Oneness Pentecostalism vs. Trinitarianism], the Lord revealed to him the truth of the ‘Godhead,’ which automatically motivated him to take the middle ground on these issues. Brother Sowers contended that there were not three, not one, but rather two separate persons in the Godhead – God the Father, which he asserted was ‘a Spirit (Being)’ . . . and Jesus the Son, a Heavenly Creature.<sup>8</sup>

**Christ:** The eternity of Jesus Christ is unquestionably denied. Lloyd Goodwin writes,

Christ has a pre-existent beginning . . . Jesus is not co-equal with his Father. Jesus did not, in the early ages of eternity always co-exist, co-equal with his Father. In fact there was a time when God dwelt alone. There was no Son. There was no universe. There was no creation. Just God!<sup>9</sup>

At the time of creation, Jesus Christ was the first act of creation.

**The Holy Spirit:** As explained above, the Holy Spirit is not the third member of the Godhead. Instead, the Holy Spirit is nothing more than the manifested power or presence of God the Father or Jesus Christ. The Spirit does not have a distinct personality nor is the Spirit considered a distinct person.

**Salvation:** Three steps are necessary for salvation within the teachings of the Gospel Assembly Church: repentance/conversion, water baptism, Holy Spirit baptism. The Gospel Assembly Church believes that all men are born into sin and, by necessity, are in need of salvation. The Church believes in the penal-substitutionary atonement of Jesus Christ and that the atonement provides deliverance and healing for anyone believing in Christ. The Gospel Assembly Church is also Calvinistic, believing that God chooses those who will be saved and those who will be damned, based only on His will and not on man’s free choice.

**The Church:** The Gospel Assembly Church believes that the local church congregation should be completely autonomous, free from the control by, or membership in, any denominational organization. The Church does not have an official headquarters and should not be considered an organized denomination. According to Gospel Assembly teaching, organized denominations are that which the Bible calls “Mystery Babylon.”<sup>10</sup>

William Sowers claimed that churches belonging to an organized denominational structure are all controlled by the Roman Catholic Church and the World Council of Churches. Lloyd Goodwin adds that denominational churches are allied with the United Nations in “working through that agency, striving for an eventual one-world government.”<sup>11</sup>

**The End Times:** The Gospel Assembly Church supports the pre-millennial view of the end times, believing Christ will return to the earth to establish a millennial kingdom. They teach that the rapture will occur in the midst of the last prophetic hour, a mid-tribulation position. Yet, not all Christian believers will be raptured. The Gospel Assembly Church believes that there is a limited number, the 144,000 of Revelation 14:1, which will be raptured. Those who are not included within the 144,000 must go into hiding for the remaining three and one-half years of the tribulation.

## **CHRISTIAN RESPONSE**

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**Scripture:** Though the Gospel Assembly Church should be applauded for some of their beliefs, much within their system is still severely lacking, especially in light of biblical teachings. First, the Gospel Assembly Church does not simply interpret Scripture using only other Scripture. Though Glenn Goodwin makes the claim that the Gospel Assembly

Church interprets the Bible only by using other verses within the Bible, this is just not the case.

When pressed on the issue of interpretation, Goodwin simply falls back on the interpretation of Sowders, not on the inspired text of Scripture. For example, 2 Corinthians 13:14 says “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Ghost, be with you all. Amen.” When asked about his interpretation of this passage, Goodwin responded,

This verse speaks of the grace of Jesus, the love of God and the communion of the Holy Ghost. Grace requires a person to bestow it. Love requires a lover. But communion does not require a personal entity to bestow or generate that relationship.<sup>12</sup>

This interpretation could not be more misguided. Goodwin is incorrect in arguing that fellowship (communion) requires no personal being to initiate the relationship of fellowship. Fellowship absolutely requires a person to generate that type of relationship. Inanimate, impersonal objects do not and can not generate a relationship of fellowship. Fellowship does take a willful, conscious act of a personal being in order to be initiated. Put simply, as Paul puts it in 2 Corinthians 13:14, the Holy Spirit offers a willful, conscious act to believers to call them into a relationship of fellowship. This is the plain reading of the text, a reading that Goodwin does not allow because of his anti-Trinitarian presuppositions.

**Jesus Christ:** Jesus is much more than just the first created being. John and Paul specifically speak of Jesus as God and man, not just a created being. John 1:1-18 shows, without any doubt, that Jesus is himself the God-man, the one who was not only with God in the beginning, but the one who was God before the beginning. Colossians 2:9 also paints a beautiful picture of the fullness Jesus’ deity.

**The Holy Spirit:** The Holy Spirit is more than the simple presence of God the Father or Jesus. From the beginning of Scripture, the Holy Spirit is presented as distinct from God (Genesis 1:1-2), at work in creation (Job 26:13; 33:4; Ps. 104:30), co-equal with the Father and Jesus (Matt. 3:15-16; 28:19; 2 Cor. 13:14), a separate person from the Father and Jesus (John 14:16; 2 Cor. 13:14), and is given specific roles and job functions (John 16:13; 2 Cor. 13:14). Clearly, the Holy Spirit is the third member of the Godhead and is a personal, distinct being.

#### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The information in this section is drawn exclusively from Lloyd L. Goodwin’s *The Former Days* (Des Moines, IO: Gospel Assembly Church, n.d.). This pamphlet covers the ministries of William J. Sowders, Thomas M. Jolly, and Lloyd L. Goodwin. Other small pamphlets are available from the Gospel Assembly Church, but they are simply reprints of *The Former Days*. This work is thus solely relied upon for the early history of the Church.
- <sup>2</sup> *The Former Days*, 3.
- <sup>3</sup> Glenn Goodwin, “A Brief History of The Body of Christ (In the Twentieth Century)” (Des Moines, IO: Des Moines Gospel Assembly Church, n.d.), 13. Glenn Goodwin, pastor of the Des Moines Gospel Assembly Church, is the son of Vernon Goodwin, and the nephew of Lloyd Goodwin.
- <sup>4</sup> Much of the section dealing with the beliefs of the Gospel Assembly Church comes from one source: Glenn Goodwin. Goodwin wrote a research paper dealing with the beliefs of the Church and the author of this Profile conducted numerous interviews with Goodwin concerning the belief system and polity structure of the Gospel Assembly Church.
- <sup>5</sup> Glenn Goodwin (Pastor, Gospel Assembly Church, Des Moines, Iowa), in discussion with the author, August, 2006.
- <sup>6</sup> Glenn Goodwin, “A Research Paper,” 46.
- <sup>7</sup> Lloyd L. Goodwin, *The Mystery of the Godhead* (Des Moines: Gospel Assembly Church, n.d.), 31.
- <sup>8</sup> *The Former Days*, 12.
- <sup>9</sup> *The Mystery of the Godhead*, 16, 19.
- <sup>10</sup> Glenn Goodwin, “A Research Paper,” 58.
- <sup>11</sup> *The Former Days*, 13.
- <sup>12</sup> Glenn Goodwin, in discussion with the author, August, 2006.



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