

## Protestant Continuities in The Church of Almighty God

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**ABSTRACT:** The theology of Christian new religious movements is often denounced as “heretic” by Evangelical critics. This paper explores the beliefs of The Church of Almighty God (CAG) in comparison to several prominent Protestant sub-traditions. The CAG is a Christian new religion that has been banned in China as a *xie jiao*, with the Chinese government partly justifying its campaign against them by arguing that it is a false form of Christianity. The CAG believes that Jesus Christ has returned to the world as Almighty God, and regards Almighty God’s messages as an authoritative Christian scripture. From a “confessional” perspective, this innovation arguably raises questions about the Christian character of the CAG. Despite this, the main priorities of the CAG are expressed in the idiom of systematic theology, in the terms and metaphysical axioms of Christian religious thought. CAG beliefs resonate core doctrines from Protestantism so strongly that continuity and development of Christian beliefs is evident in various aspects of CAG theology. In turn, understanding continuities with teachings of traditional Christianity supports the conclusion that the CAG is indeed “Christian.”

**KEYWORDS:** The Church of Almighty God, New Religious Movements, New Religious Movements in China, Religious Persecution in China, *Xie Jiao*, Eastern Lightning.

### *Statement of Method*

My goal here is to describe CAG theology in a manner that both scholars and believers would recognize (Clifford and Marcus 1986). Within a framework of description, interpretation and evaluation (“DIE”: Bennett et al 1988), my discussion focuses primarily on the first step. CAG religious beliefs are not well understood by non-members, and it is important for scholars to be able to understand them adequately.

In religious studies, the terms *emic* and *etic* refer to “insider” and “outsider” perspectives (Pike 1999; Harris 1983). My discussion is from an emic viewpoint,

seeking to understand CAG theology in the way that its members do. On the other hand, my comparison of the CAG with other Christian traditions is etic rather than emic, and CAG leaders and members would not agree with such a comparison. They would argue that the teachings of the CAG are based on God's work rather than on human doctrines, and that the comparison of Almighty God's work and words with Jesus' work and words should be enough to support the conclusion that the CAG is indeed "Christian." I use here the terms and nomenclature of the members, and refer to the Second Incarnation as Almighty God. I also respect the CAG's use to refer to Almighty God as "he" rather than "she." Although the Second Incarnation is a woman, for CAG brothers and sisters it is more important to emphasize that Jehovah God, Jesus Christ, and Almighty God are one and the same God than to focus on the gendered body of the present incarnation.

The basic beliefs of the CAG are available on their website (HolySpiritSpeaks.org 2018), and I have included a number of secondary sources in the bibliography for further reading (Dunn 2007, 2008, 2009, 2015; Introvigne 2017; Pan 2015), although some of them are by now outdated. The main source for my observations here, however, are my fellowship experiences with CAG brothers and sisters over the past two years.

### *The Christian Origins of the Beliefs of The Church of Almighty God*

For The Church of Almighty God, what is definitional about Christianity is the principle that God relates to humanity, and redeems and saves them, through the work of embodied *Incarnations*.

Almighty God himself stated,

If God does not become flesh, He remains the Spirit both invisible and intangible to man. Man is a creature of flesh, and man and God belong to two different worlds and are different in nature. The Spirit of God is incompatible with man of flesh, and no relations can be established between them; moreover, man cannot become a spirit. As such, the Spirit of God must become one of the creatures and do His original work (The Church of Almighty God 2018l).

Both Jesus and Almighty God are regarded by the CAG as God incarnate, originating from the Spirit of God. Both their works and words are deemed to be expressions of the "Christ." Almighty God explains, "The incarnate God is called

Christ, and Christ is the flesh donned by the Spirit of God” (The Church of Almighty God 2018m). The Church of Almighty God is not Trinitarian; neither can it accurately be called “Modalist.” The CAG believes that Jesus, Almighty God, and Jehovah God are one and the same God. There is a sense that God is complete and singular throughout the ages, but that some of God’s *dispositions* are more prominently expressed in different time periods. God’s *dispositions* present what he has and is and his essential identity, which is possessed uniquely by the Creator. God’s dispositions are understood to be eternal, but across the ages his different dispositions were manifested according to his works in different stages. For instance, during the Age of Law, Jehovah God revealed his disposition of majesty and wrath mainly through the issuance of laws; during the Age of Grace, Jesus Christ revealed God’s disposition of love and mercy through the work of redemption. With the changing of the times of his work, God expressed and revealed all His own dispositions to humanity gradually and allowed them to know him.

The framework of *dispensations* sets different terms and conditions between God and humankind: what each promises the other in a covenant relationship. During the Age of Law, God “guided” humanity to live on Earth with rules and laws. The primary purpose of religion in this time was the provision of social order, guarding of morality, and cultivation of appropriate fear of God. Noah, Abraham and Job are models for humanity from the Age of Law, each showing complete obedience to God when their faith was challenged. Almighty God says,

Noah was the first person to receive God’s call to work with Him to complete a task of God. ... After Abraham, God made a choice once again for the first time—He chose Job to be the one under the law who could withstand the temptations of Satan while continuing to fear God and shun evil and stand witness for Him (Church of Almighty God 2018f).

In a manner consistent with many Christian sub-traditions, Jesus, whose coming inaugurates the Age of Grace, is understood to be more accessible than Jehovah of the Old Testament, who is exclusively spiritual. As a fleshly incarnation, Jesus fits human needs for a deity, and also gives God a more empathetic framework for shepherding, sustaining, suckling, nourishing and remaining in a practical contact with his creatures. The understanding of the Age of Law and the Age of Grace in the CAG reflects a classic dichotomy in Christian systematic theology. This outlook sees the New Testament God as more accessible and forgiving.

### For Almighty God, [Jesus]

always comforted His disciples, provided for them, helped them, and sustained them. ... He never made excessive demands of the people, but was always patient and forbearing of their sins, such that people in the Age of Grace affectionately called Him ‘the lovable Savior Jesus.’ To the people of that time—to all people—what Jesus had and was, was mercy and lovingkindness. He never remembered people’s transgressions, and His treatment of them was not based on their transgressions. Because that was a different age, He often bestowed plentiful food and drink upon the people so that they could eat their fill. He treated all His followers with grace, healing the sick, driving out demons, raising the dead (The Church of Almighty God 2018n).

Jesus is understood as having secured humanity’s forgiveness from the sins we commit, but not having changed our innate condition as sinful creatures, nor transformed our sinful nature. In the Third Age, Almighty God has the qualitatively distinct work of refining and purifying humanity. In Almighty God’s own words,

Though Jesus did much work among man, He only completed the redemption of all mankind and became man’s sin offering, and did not rid man of all his corrupt disposition. ... And so, after man was forgiven his sins, God has returned to flesh to lead man into the new age, and begun the work of chastisement and judgment, and this work has brought man into a higher realm (The Church of Almighty God 2018i).

In what is called The Age of Kingdom, Almighty God is a righteous judge. While maintaining a sense of affection for Jesus, the CAG holds an even greater sentiment that humanity will only grow when guided by the returned Jesus Christ. These ideas, on the one hand, come from the traditional Christian theme of humanity’s need of breaking through from the bondage of sins, and on the other hand, from the prophecies of Jesus Christ’s return in the last days. For instance, Jesus foretold that he “still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth” (*John* 16:12–13) In the Age of Kingdom, Almighty God does his work to judge, purify and save humanity, and manifests not only the dispositions of love and mercy, but also righteousness, majesty and wrath. Yet as an incarnation, Almighty God is, like Jesus, still more accessible to humanity than Jehovah, who is entirely spiritual and somewhat “vague.” In Almighty God’s own words,

The incarnate God brings to an end the age when only the back of Jehovah appeared to mankind, and also concludes the age of mankind’s belief in the vague God. In particular, the work of the last incarnate God brings all mankind into an age that is more realistic, more practical, and more pleasant. He not only concludes the age of law and doctrine; more

importantly, He reveals to mankind a God who is real and normal, who is righteous and holy, who unlocks the work of the management plan and demonstrates the mysteries and destination of mankind, who created mankind and brings to an end the management work, and who has remained hidden for thousands of years. He brings the age of vagueness to a complete end, He concludes the age in which the whole of mankind wished to seek God's face but was unable to, He ends the age in which the whole of mankind served Satan, and leads the whole of mankind all the way into a completely new era (The Church of Almighty God 2018c).

Almighty God is near and far at the same time. Though few members are able to meet or see Almighty God, the CAG insists that the words Almighty God has expressed allow all readers to gain knowledge of God's work, God's disposition, and what God has and is.

Although the CAG never mentions her name nor any biographic details, some scholars believe that the name of the Chinese woman recognized as the incarnated Almighty God is Yang Xiangbin. The CAG's brothers and sisters think that it is more important to know the truth and God's substance through experiencing his words than knowing the details of God's incarnated life. They claim that in the Age of Grace the early Christians had a similar attitude with respect to Jesus Christ.

### *Authoritative Holy Scriptures in The Church of Almighty God*

The CAG thinks that God is always new and never old. God does new work in each age and expresses new words to guide human beings. The CAG does not disavow the Bible, though it is often accused of doing so. The Bible is recognized as the scripture of the Age of Law and Age of Grace, but in the Age of Kingdom Almighty God has expressed new words collected in the book *The Word Appears in the Flesh*, which is called "the Bible of the Age of Kingdom." The Bible is seen as a compilation of accounts of encounters with God. Recorded by human beings, it contains messages from God and some truthful insights, which are helpful to know God's work in the Age of Law and the Age of Grace, but it also carries many human errors. Almighty God warns,

Not everything in the Bible is a record of the words personally spoken by God. The Bible simply documents the previous two stages of God's work, of which one part is a record of the foretellings of the prophets, and one part is the experiences and knowledge written by people used by God throughout the ages (The Church of Almighty God 2018b, 2018k).

Brothers and sisters in the CAG regard *The Word Appears in the Flesh*, their main holy scripture, and the other utterances of Almighty God as the authoritative scriptures of our age. Yet, a similar spirit of biblicism animates both the CAG and many conservative forms of Protestantism.

It is a main tenet of CAG theology that “The work of Almighty God is accomplished through words.” *The Word Appears in the Flesh* announces,

‘In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God, and the Word became flesh.’ This (the work of the appearance of the Word in the flesh) is the work that God will accomplish in the last days, and is the final chapter of His entire management plan .... During the last days, when God becomes flesh, He principally uses the word to accomplish all and make all plain. Only in His words can you see what He is; only in His words can you see that He is God Himself (The Church of Almighty God 2018a).

Here, it is important to apprehend the double meaning of *word/words* that is widespread in Christian theology. Historically, “God’s Word” has referred to the Bible. Similarly, for the CAG “words” has a literal meaning: texts containing the utterances of Almighty God. At the same time, the emphasis on words summons the Christian concept of *Logos*, the traditional Christian idea that “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. (...) And the Word became flesh” (*John* 1:1,14), with *Words* being both performative acts and material expressions of God’s creation. In Almighty God’s own words,

Jesus did a stage of work which only fulfilled the substance of ‘the Word was with God’: The truth of God was with God, and the Spirit of God was with the flesh and was inseparable from Him, that is, the flesh of God incarnate was with the Spirit of God, which is greater proof that Jesus incarnate was the first incarnation of God. This stage of work fulfilled the inner meaning of ‘the Word becomes flesh,’ lent deeper meaning to ‘the Word was with God, and the Word was God,’ and allows you to firmly believe the words that ‘In the beginning was the Word.’ Which is to say, at the time of creation God was possessed of words, His words were with Him and inseparable from Him, and the final age makes even clearer the power and authority of His words, and allows man to see all of His words—to hear all of His words. Such is the work of the final age (The Church of Almighty God 2018s).

Through the word, man comes to know the work of God, the disposition of God, the essence of man, and what man ought to enter into. Through the word, all the work God wishes to do in the Age of Word is accomplished. Through the word, man is revealed, eliminated, and tried. ... Though the word ‘word’ is simple and ordinary, the word from the mouth of God become flesh shakes the entire universe. His word transforms the heart of man, the notions and the old disposition of man, and the old appearance of the entire world (The Church of Almighty God 2018h).

This double meaning informs the main tenets of CAG eschatology as well: the utterances of God are announcements of a greater *Management Plan* that is unfolding, and that will ultimately seal the fate of mankind, as well as our individual *destinations*.

### *The Three Stages of God's Management Plan*

Revealed in the utterances and messages of Almighty God, The Management Plan outlines the foreseen destiny (destination) for all of mankind. In CAG theology, the cosmic history of mankind has unfolded over a time period of 6000 years, divided into three Ages, also known as “Stages of Work.” This is God’s entire management plan for saving humankind.

In Almighty God’s own words,

My entire management plan, a plan that spans six thousand years, consists of three stages, or three ages: the Age of Law in the beginning; the Age of Grace (which is also the Age of Redemption); and the Age of Kingdom in the last days. My work in these three ages differs in content according to the nature of each age, but at each stage it accords with man’s needs—or, to be more precise, it is done according to the tricks that Satan employs in the war that I wage against it. The purpose of My work is to defeat Satan, to make manifest My wisdom and omnipotence, to expose all of Satan’s tricks, and thereby to save the entire human race, which lives under its domain. ... (The Church of Almighty God 2018n).

The period when God Jehovah led humans, from the time human beings were tempted and corrupted by Satan to the time Lord Jesus revealed himself and performed the redemption work, is known as the Age of Law. The span between Jesus and Almighty God is the Age of Grace. We currently live in the Third Age, in which Almighty God is God’s incarnation, just like Jesus in the Age of Grace, and revealed himself as the last divine manifestation. Jehovah, Jesus, and Almighty God are one and the same God. The work of three stages goes step-by-step, closely interlocked with one another. The work is done by the one and only God. The CAG does not believe in evolution, but their understanding of cosmic history allows for the world to be older than this 6000-year period.

The CAG teaches that the time span from when Adam and Eve were expelled from the Garden of Eden to the flood at the time of Noah was 1500 years. In this period, humankind is thought to have lived in a state of nature. God did not guide humankind formally. However, people indulged their corrupt nature so much that

God was moved to destroy them in the flood, saving only Noah and his family. After Noah, God began to work directly with humankind. At the time of Moses, God promulgated laws and commandments to lead their life and religion. As Almighty God summarizes, “The first stage of God’s work was the leadership of man” (The Church of Almighty God 2018j). Encompassing Abraham, Moses and Job, the Age of Law endured for 2500 years after Noah’s ark landed on dry ground. The total time span of the Age of Law was 4000 years.

The crucifixion of Jesus accomplished the Redemption work. It also provided new possibilities for humanity to relate to God. Jesus is understood to have redeemed humankind from sin, but he didn’t perform the work of removing the sinful nature of humanity. In the era of Jesus, however, humanity still made many advances in relating to God. People could now have a personal relationship with the savior.

The Age of Kingdom (also called the Age of Word) began in 1991, the year Almighty God began delivering messages to humanity. In the Age of Kingdom, human beings have the opportunity to be freed from the bonds of sin, be purified and saved, and to enter into what many low-church Christians would describe as “right relation” with God. We should do this by accepting the work of Almighty God’s *judgment* and *chastisement*, together with his words. This is the key and decisive work through which God saves humankind. Those who have accepted the Almighty God should pray often to him, and consider their own corrupt nature and Satan’s influence. They should be guided by God’s words to overcome their sinful nature, and be purified and *perfected* by God.

Perfection is an idea associated most strongly with the Methodist family tradition. John Wesley (1703–1791) was one of the first Evangelical leaders to propose that, with a vigorous pursuit of the Christian life, it might be possible to change one’s nature, away from sinfulness. A person might still sin, but doing so would not be our “default state.” Perfectionism was carried in the Holiness and Pentecostal traditions, where it became associated with the exhibit of spiritual gifts. The CAG rejects present day miracles, and their understanding of Perfection is much closer to the original definition. In CAG theology, Perfection refers to a complete removal of one’s sinful nature. God is righteous and those who sincerely pursue the truth can indeed get perfected. Everyone should work toward it as a goal. One of the main ways to perfection is acceptance of, and obedience to, Almighty God’s words and work.



Operating in the present day, the Third Stage of God’s Management Plan allows human beings to align with God and undergo spiritual purification, but only a limited fraction of humanity will pursue the truth fully and achieve this goal. In this final stage, there will be a winnowing of humanity. The saved people will be transformed into godly people, the *overcomers* who are in right relation to God. Those who reject the message of Almighty God, who keep to wicked ways, and implicitly side with Satan will be judged, punished, destroyed, and die in cataclysms such as earthquakes and floods: “The entire human race admits that the end of the world is coming. When the disaster comes, anyone who resists God, judges God, or opposes God, and the ilk of the devil Satan will be destroyed in the disasters” (The Church of Almighty God 2018o).

However, the Earth will not be annihilated, and the ones who are purified by God will be saved in the cataclysms of the last days, and will live on Earth forever and ever. Almighty God says,

“But know that I will not annihilate the entire world, nor will I annihilate the whole of mankind. I will keep that remaining third—the third that loves Me and has been thoroughly conquered by Me, and I will cause this third to be fruitful and multiply on earth just as the Israelites did under the law, nourishing them with copious sheep and cattle and all the riches of earth. ... the mankind that has been conquered during the last days is also the mankind that will be spared and will gain My everlasting blessings. It will be the only evidence of My triumph over Satan, and the only spoils of My battle with Satan. These spoils of war are saved by Me from the domain of Satan, and are the only crystallization and fruit of My six-thousand-year management plan” (The Church of Almighty God 2018t).

The division of history into several eras reflects the influence of the Plymouth Brethren and other evangelical missionaries in China. Dispensationalism, a method of Biblical interpretation that supports a cosmic view of history that includes the end times, was developed in the nineteenth century by John Nelson Darby (1800–1882), the founder of the Plymouth Brethren tradition (Marsden 1982; Introvigne 2018). There are differences between Darby’s rendition and CAG theology, but both presume that God has different ways of relating to human beings in successive time periods. Both frame the history of mankind as one that has progressed under the yoke of Satan, which only will be broken in a final, ultimate conflict, foretold in scripture, especially in the Book of Revelation. Both prophesy that following this battle, there will be a peaceful period on earth, and a final resolution when God and Man are “at rest together.” The CAG calls this wonderful time which generations of saints hoped to see the Age of Millennial

Kingdom, which is not to be confused with the Age of Kingdom (Introvigne 2017).

Almighty God says,

Following the completion of My words, the kingdom is gradually formed on earth and man is gradually returned to normality, and thus there is established on earth the kingdom in My heart. In the kingdom, all the people of God recover the life of normal man. Gone is the frosty winter, replaced by a world of cities of spring, where it is spring all year round. No longer are people faced with the gloomy, miserable world of man, no longer do they endure the cold chill of the world of man. People do not fight with each other, countries do not go to war against each other, no longer is there carnage and the blood that flows from carnage; all lands are filled with happiness, and everywhere teems with warmth between men (The Church of Almighty God 2018u).

Dispensationalism is widespread in evangelicalism, beyond the Brethren. The CAG, however, added significant and genuinely original innovations.

The CAG believes that the Book of Revelation contains a true prophecy, expressed through metaphor. One of the most important symbols is the “Great Red Dragon” from *Revelation* 12, which Almighty God explains thus: “The great red dragon I speak of is not a big red dragon; rather it is the evil spirit in opposition to Me, for which the ‘great red dragon’ is a synonym” (The Church of Almighty God 2018p). For the CAG, the red dragon is identified with the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). “The great red dragon persecutes God and is the enemy of God, so in this land, those who believe in God are subjected to humiliation and persecution” (The Church of Almighty God 2018d). The importance of the color red and of dragons in Chinese culture makes the Bible’s monster a natural symbol for the CCP (Dunn 2008). The alignment of the Great Red Dragon to the CCP has a strong similarity to the connections drawn in the projects of Herbert W. Armstrong (1892–1986) and Hal Lindsey, who used the Bible’s prophecies to interpret current events during the Cold War. Lindsey’s book, *The Late, Great Planet Earth* (Lindsey 1970), and Armstrong’s *The United States and British Commonwealth in Prophecy* (Armstrong 1967) are two of the most prominent texts in a genre of popular Christian fiction, in which people and places are recognized as sacred symbols—or profane ones, in the case of the Red Dragon.

*Calvinist Beliefs in The Church of Almighty God*

Prominent ideas from several Christian sub-traditions resonate in CAG theology, but the most sonorous of these is the Calvinist-Reformed tradition. In my conversations with believers, their attitude continually reminded me of the Puritans described by the Harvard historians Perry Miller (1905–1963) and David Hall. I should emphasize, here, that this is my personal observation and opinion as an outside observer. The CAG's brothers and sisters would not agree with such a comparison. They would argue that the doctrine of the CAG comes from all the truths God expresses in three stages of work, i.e. the Age of Law, the Age of Grace and the Age of Kingdom, while Calvinism originated from the limited knowledge humans had about the work of the Lord Jesus in the Age of Grace, and as a consequence is merely human teaching. According to the CAG, God is so wondrous that humans can never fathom him. Human knowledge of God is inevitably found to be limited, and cannot be compared with God's direct teachings.

For the CAG, everything is arranged according to God's Management Plan, the Three Stages of Work. Predestination is the signature doctrine for Calvinism, and in my opinion that the CAG upholds the idea shows the legacy of the Reformed tradition. Calvinism has a distinct understanding of human beings and their relation to God. Our purpose is to love and obey the Creator and accept whatever is God's will for us. In Almighty God's own words,

As a creature, man should perform the duty of a creature: Man should follow God in whatever He does, and you should proceed in whatever way I tell you to. You have no way of making arrangements for yourself, and you are incapable of controlling yourself; all must be left to the mercy of God, and everything is controlled by His hands (The Church of Almighty God 2018j).

In the CAG, obedience to God is stressed.

A normal relationship with God means being able to not doubt or deny any of God's work and submit to it. ... To build a good relationship with God is a top priority for anyone believing in God; everyone should treat it as the most important task and as their major life event. Everything you do should be weighed against whether or not you have a normal relationship with God (The Church of Almighty God 2018g).

In traditional Christianity, Jesus is associated with "blessings," which people could receive simply by asking. In contrast, CAG believers do not ask Almighty God for blessings, nor do they perform petitionary prayers. They trust that

Almighty God will reward the faithful, as well as punish the wicked. Almighty God says, “Having faith in God, you should not solely seek blessings, but seek to love God and know God” (The Church of Almighty God 2018r). Rather, one is to accept what God bestows, be it suffering or happiness. The CAG theodicy stands behind their moral theory of illness. Sickness is the result of Satan’s corruption of humans; an *affliction* intended to inspire self-reflection and lead us to seek repentance. It should be, however, noted that the CAG teaches that there is no conflict between self-reflection and seeking proper medical treatment.

As is true in other predestinarian Christian traditions, there is some flexibility in how the CAG understands predestination. People have a choice to “cooperate” with God in the process of *refinement*, or spiritual change. Whether humans can or cannot be purified and perfected depends on their cooperation. Almighty God says, “Success or failure depends on the path that man walks” (The Church of Almighty God 2018v):

The Holy Spirit works by this principle: Through people’s cooperation, through them actively praying, searching and coming closer to God, results can be achieved and they can be enlightened and illuminated by the Holy Spirit. It is not the case that the Holy Spirit acts unilaterally, or that man acts unilaterally. Both are indispensable, and the more that people cooperate, and the more they pursue the attainment of the standards of God’s requirements, the greater the work of the Holy Spirit. Only people’s real cooperation, added to the work of the Holy Spirit, can produce real experiences and the substantive knowledge of God’s words. Gradually, through experiencing in this way, a perfect person is ultimately produced (The Church of Almighty God 2018w).

Almighty God tells believers, “Throughout the Age of Kingdom, God uses the word to do His work and achieve the results of His work” (The Church of Almighty God 2018h). The CAG is cessationist, which is another similarity to the Calvinist worldview. In opposition to the mystical presence asserted by the Catholic Church, Reformed theologians like John Calvin (1509–1564) maintained that miracles were no longer possible. Only the Apostles could perform miracles, as Jesus had commanded them to do in his name. With the passing of the first generation of Christians, the age of spiritual gifts ended. Since then, God has been active in history, but does not upend natural laws. The CAG does not see the gifts of the spirit as available in the Age of Kingdom. In comparison with natural wonders, the fact that humans are perfected by words is emphasized in the CAG. Almighty God warns that,

Those signs cannot make man perfect! ... God causes man to gain life from His words, and this is the greatest of all signs, and even more so, it is an undisputable fact. This is the best evidence through which to have knowledge of God, and is an even greater sign than signs. Only these words can make man perfect (The Church of Almighty God 2018x).

Cessationism helps support the logic of Protestant natural theology, which sees God's character and will manifesting through nature. In keeping with this logic, Almighty God has delivered many messages on the wonders of creation. Almighty God says,

From the very phrase 'God is in control of everything' we should see that what God controls is not a portion of planets, a portion of creation, much less a portion of mankind, but everything: from the massive to the microscopic, from the visible to the invisible, from the stars in the universe to the living things on earth, as well as microorganisms that cannot be seen with the naked eye or beings that exist in other forms. This is the precise definition of the 'everything' that God is 'in control of,' and is the scope over which God wields His authority, the extent of His sovereignty and rule (The Church of Almighty God 2018e).

In this age God works through the natural world, and does not use supernatural means. The "disasters" are anticipated to unfold as natural events: floods, earthquakes, and other cataclysms, as well as political oppression and war. These natural and human-made disasters are already unfolding today, with God's awareness, as part of the Management Plan.

Along with predestination, CAG theology asserts human *depravity*, which is also another teaching in "Five Point Calvinism." In the Third Age, the Age of Kingdom, Almighty God comes to judge humanity. Like many conservative Protestants, the CAG believes that God is righteous and holy. He will punish human beings who do not turn from sin. In *The Word Appears in the Flesh*, Almighty God repeatedly chastises human beings for giving in to their corrupt nature. The CAG proclaims that the purpose of judgement is for God's salvation, which is God's greater love to human beings. Almighty God says,

In the last days, Christ uses a variety of truths to teach man, expose the essence of man, and dissect his words and deeds...What the work of judgment brings about is man's understanding of the true face of God and the truth about his own rebelliousness. The work of judgment allows man to gain much understanding of the will of God, of the purpose of God's work, and of the mysteries that are incomprehensible to him. It also allows man to recognize and know his corrupt substance and the roots of his corruption, as well as to discover the ugliness of man. These effects are all brought about by the work of judgment, for the substance of this work is actually the work of opening up the truth, the way, and the life of God to all those who have faith in Him (The Church of Almighty God 2018y).

I also see a similarity with Calvinism in the CAG's perspective on theodicy, the problem of evil. Almighty God *deals* with human beings through *chastisement* and *judgment*, *affliction*, *refinement*, and *pruning*. In other words, Almighty God metes out punishment (which we deserve, certainly), to get our attention so we are motivated to change. The suffering we undergo is difficult, but it will change our character and bring us to a closer relationship with God. This offers a personalizable theodicy—a lens through which to view individual hardship. With the Age of Grace now in the past, CAG theology does not take up Unconditional Election or Limited Atonement (additional Calvinist points affirmed at the 1618 Synod of Dordt), but the understanding of how Almighty God saves mankind is broadly similar to Irresistible Grace—putting us into situations wherein we grow and develop the capacity to know God.

Like the Puritans and other Calvinists, the CAG understands Satan as a real entity who like God is active in the world. Some supernatural activity or trickery, therefore, is associated with Satan and evil spirits. The CAG's understanding of Satan's persona compares closely with the one created by John Milton (1608–1674) in *Paradise Lost*. Satan is an opposer of God, the consummate rebel, whose attempt to match God in power led to his alienation from God and goodness. “Satan is humanity's foe, the lowest of the low, the evil one. ... I am the Ruler of all things and Satan is merely one of My creations, which later turned against Me” (The Church of Almighty God 2018n).

Satan's corruption of mankind is such that our transgressions against God descend from that original uprising. Corrupt mankind is rebellious and “arrogant.” Demons and evil spirits are fallen angels, the spiritual beings who joined Satan in challenging God and were cast out of heaven. The CAG rejects the fantastic and phantasmagorical elements, but recognizes Satan as a real presence in the world. Satan is the force that corrupts humanity inducing us to turn away from God, and *it* also directly causes much of the suffering in the world. [Note that Satan is so evil as to lack the characteristics that would accord “it” a persona or gender].

The battle between God and Satan is real, but not one that will unfold on the Plain of Megiddo. The fight takes place within and for the *hearts* of individual human beings. The CAG zealously shares the message of Almighty God, because *gaining* believers is the means by which God will conquer Satan. In Almighty God's own words:

God's work of the last days is in order to alter each person's spirit, to change each person's soul, such that their heart, which has suffered great trauma, is reformed, thus rescuing their soul, which has been so profoundly harmed by evil; it is in order to awaken people's spirits, to thaw their cold hearts, and allow them to be rejuvenated (The Church of Almighty God 2018q).

### *The Religious Vocabulary of CAG Theology*

The continuity of Christian traditions in CAG theology is a tantalizing invitation to consider the distinct intellectual heritage carried in Christian missions. The theological fusion likely relates to the transmission of Protestantism to China through inter-denominational projects like the American Bible Society and China Inland Mission. Many religious historians consider the 19<sup>th</sup> century a time of broad evangelical consensus (Marsden 1982; Frank 2009). Although individual denominations carried their versions of Christianity to new lands, many of the largest ventures were interfaith endeavors that developed in an era of Protestant "comity." Evidence suggests their cooperation brought a rich, ultimately combinative, theological vocabulary to mission fields like China.

How much prior sources have shaped the CAG is a matter of debate. Early on, many of the people who joined the CAG had been "Shouters," participants in the Chinese branch of the Local Church. Some scholars credit Watchman Nee (1903–1972) and Witness Lee (1905–1997) as major influences. Yet there are major differences in belief and practice between the Local Church and The Church of Almighty God. The CAG believes that Almighty God at first spoke in the Shouters. They report that, after reading the words of Almighty God, some believers in the Shouters recognized that Almighty God is the return of the Lord Jesus, "returned to Almighty God" (their preferred expression for "converting"), and joined The Church of Almighty God. They insist, however that the CAG came into being because of God's appearance and work, rather than evolving from any denomination.

The two traditions are most alike in their use of a specific religious vocabulary, with phrases like *the Full Weight of Glory*, which actually is a Biblical reference (2 *Corinthians* 4:17). As with the other concepts outlined here, much of this religious vocabulary predates the Local Church, often by several centuries. For example, the CAG describes reading Almighty God's messages as "Eating and

Drinking the Word of God”; and the term is also used by the Shouters, to describe their reading of the Bible. To “Eat and Drink God’s Word,” precedes the Local Church, however, for it was first posited by St. Irenaeus (ca. 130–202: St. Irenaeus n.d.). Such vocabulary shows both groups in discursive engagement with older strains of Christianity. This religious language can be found across the spectrum of Protestantism historically and in many Christianities today, in Asia and elsewhere.

Philology can open many doors to understanding the transmission of Christianity. Let me describe an experiment I have done several times over the past year, which readers can try for themselves. On Google Books, I have run key searches for combinations of theological terms: running, for example, “chastisement, judgement, and affliction”; and often limiting results to those from the 19<sup>th</sup> or early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Different searches yield different hits, but the top finds are often startling, and have included Joseph Haven’s (1816–1874) *Mental Philosophy* (an important Presbyterian text), Primitive Baptist newspapers, and the writings of Seventh-day Adventist leader Ellen Gould White (1827–1915). Following the lead of Benedict Anderson (1936–2015), to consider the discursive communities fostered by print culture opens up exciting ways to research world missions and understand global Christianity today.

Though well beyond the scope of this paper, I believe this religious vocabulary should be studied much more. For scholars, it illuminates how Christians in China have encountered and apprehended their tradition. The language points to a continuity of important principles in Christianity, reflecting what Christians see as eternal aspects of God’s disposition through the ages. This language is powerful evidence of the Christian heritage in The Church of Almighty God. Much of the writing about the CAG has depicted their ideas as strange, but The Church of Almighty God is very much a Christian tradition, one in responsive dialogue with other Christianities.

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