



RELIGION OF FEAR

*The True Story of the Church of
God of the Union Assembly*

David Cady

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of God of the Union Assembly*

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“A closed society which exerts power and influence over its followers, The Church of God of Union Assembly has been dominated by the general overseer who tightens control by preaching fear of God’s wrath. The faithful are controlled by detailed church rules . . . on penalty of being ‘dismissed.’ And one of the rules commands members to stay away from any dismissed member.”

MOODY CONNELL

“Faithful Follow Rules of Church,” *The Daily Citizen-News*,
July 2, 1980, 1

“One cannot and must not try to erase the past merely because it does not fit the present.”

GOLDA MEIR

Prime Minister of Israel (1969–1974)

“It may be too late for justice but never too late for the truth.”

AUTHOR UNKNOWN

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CHARLES THOMAS PRATT OF
WAYNE COUNTY, KENTUCKY, FAMILY TREE

George W. Pratt (1844-1921) married Margaret Lair (1841-1918)

Charles T. Pratt (1879-1966) married Minnie Broyles (1889-1971)

Edmond Lloyd Flora Estle Alma Jesse Martha Leola Herbert Wayman
b.1906 b.1908 b.1911 b.1912 b.1914 b. 1917 b. 1921 b.1923 b. 1928 b. 1931

Jesse Franklin Pratt

Ethel Russel married 1939 Jesse Franklin Pratt

Irene McClure married 1937 Oscar Smith

David R. Charlie T. Jimmy L

Son Betty Daughter

Jesse Franklin Pratt married 1946 Irene McClure

Jesse Franklin, Jr. Daughter Charlie T. III Daughter Son Son
b. 1946 b. 1948 b. 1953

INDEX OF INDIVIDUALS

The Family

CHARLES THOMAS PRATT

(born in 1879): Also called Charlie and C. T., founder of the Union Assembly of the Church of God. Name later changed to the Church of God Union Assembly (CGUA). Served as moderator and general overseer.

MARY "MINNIE" BROYLES PRATT

(born 1889): Wife of Charlie and secretary/treasurer of the Union Assembly Church.

OFFSPRING OF CHARLIE (C. T.) AND MINNIE PRATT (IN ORDER OF BIRTH)

EDMOND L. (ED) PRATT

(born 1906): Preacher for the Union Assembly.

LLOYD B. PRATT

(born 1908): Twin to Lewis Pratt who died at four months.

FLORA E. PRATT HUGHES

(born 1911): Midwife of the Union Assembly Church.

ELMER "ESTLE" PRATT

(born 1912): Preacher and member of the Supreme Council.

CORA "ALMA" PRATT EDWARDS

(born 1914): Midwife for the Union Assembly Church.

JESSE FRANKLIN PRATT

(born 1917): Became general overseer after his father in 1961.

MARTHA PRATT VAN METER

(born 1921): Called Tiny, she was a midwife of the Union Assembly church.

ELVA "LEOLA" PRATT CRIDER

(born 1923): Midwife of the Union Assembly church.

HERBERT H. PRATT

(born 1928): Minister and manager of the ranch in Arizona.

WAYMAN P. PRATT

(born 1931): Minister and assistant general overseer.

PAUL L. HUGHES

(born 1931): Minister, on Supreme Council. Son of Flora Pratt Hughes. Grandson of C. T. and Minnie.

JESSE FRANKLIN PRATT JR.

(born 1946): Became the Church's general overseer. Son of Jesse F. Pratt and Irene.

CHARLIE THOMAS PRATT III

(born 1953): Became general overseer. Son of Jesse F. Pratt and Irene.

CHARLES THOMAS 'TOM' PRATT

(born 1929): Became pastor in Kokomo, Indiana, and Hamilton, Ohio.
Son of Lloyd Pratt.

 SPOUSES OF THE CHILDREN OF C. T. AND MINNIE PRATT

ETHEL B. RUSSELL PRATT

(born 1922): First wife of Jesse F. Pratt Sr.; Children of Ethel and Jesse were David Ronald, Charlie T. II, Jimmy L.

IRENE MCCLURE PRATT

(born 1918): Divorced Oscar Smith to marry Jesse F. Pratt Sr.; Children were Jesse F. Junior, Charlie T. III plus two more sons and two daughters.

WESLEY CRIDER

Second husband to Leola Pratt (they married twice); member of the Supreme Council.

WANDA JEAN POOLE

(born 1951): Jesse Pratt Junior's second wife. They had five children together.

Important Ministers and Members of the Union Assembly

CLINTON BELL

Minister of the Union Assembly Church in Kokomo, Indiana, and at other CGUA churches. A member of the Supreme Council.

JOHNNY BURNETT

A one-armed pilot for the church and a minister of one of the Union Assembly churches in TN. Wife was sister to Irene. On the Supreme Council

J. WILLIE BURNETT

Minister and founding father of the Union Assembly with C. T. Pratt. Life-long member of the Supreme Council, but was removed by Jesse Sr. in 1945.

CHARLIE CARMICAL

(born 1942): Son to Hugh "Cash" Carmical. Old friend of the author's.

HUGH "CASH" CARMICAL

Became the pastor of the Knoxville Union Assembly Church in the late 1940s. Moved to Dalton to become Assistant general overseer under C. T. Pratt.

DAN HELMICK

Pastor in Kentucky. Sent to pastor the Union Assembly Church in Hamilton, Ohio.

CHARLES ROBERTS

(born 1954): Son of William (Junior) Roberts—Union Assembly pastor at Center (Cartersville), and Trion, Georgia. Grandson of Otha Pitner—Union Assembly pastor in Hamilton, Ohio, and in North Carolina.

Charles had great insight into the Union Assembly and was interviewed by the author hundreds of times. He was put on trial by the CGUA in 1995 and expelled from the church.

DENNIS SMITH

Minister and on the Supreme Council. Married to one of Irene's sisters.

DON WEST

A minister and editor of the Church paper, *The Southerner*, he was forced to leave Atlanta and then Dalton because of his Communist and union affiliations.

FOREWORD

David Cady has written an important and highly readable book. At times it reads like a novel, full of intrigue and suspense. Yet it is not a novel. Neither is it the work of a historian nor that of a psychologist, although both history and psychology are implicit when not explicit throughout the story David tells. Even the word story is misleading, for David's book is definitely not a work of fiction. David's considerable talent is directed at letting others tell their stories, their experiences of being involved in and leaving what was once a powerful emerging religion rooted in the Pratt family. The religion exists today, attenuated in the power it wields and heavily modified in its beliefs and less able to enforce behaviors among those who continue to believe in what are now less restrictive dogmas. To those well versed in the study of religion, this is the story of the founding of one of the many variants of Church of God associated with the holiness and Pentecostal traditions that began emerging in America in the nineteenth century.

David's story is of the rise of a particular tradition, the Union Assembly of the Church of God, granted a charter in 1920 in the Superior Court of Bartow County, Georgia, to Charles Pratt. Charles was a charismatic figure who began a three-generation Pratt lineage of religious influence that, for some, became a religion of fear. David wisely avoids what neither historians nor scholars of religion have been able to achieve—a consensus about what constitutes a religion, a sect, or, most problematic of all, a cult. David lets the people tell their own stories. Most are disaffiliated with the church that many say quickly evolved into a cult. While David rightly notes that “cult” is a legitimate term among those who study religious groups centered around a charismatic figure, he also rightly notes that in the popular culture it is often associated with denigrating the religious claims of the group and portraying members as being manipulated or even “brainwashed” by devious if not deluded motivations of the leader. Such popular views have given rise to a genre of what psychologists who study religion have described as atrocity tales. Most forms of religion have them. They are common among Mormons, Seventh-day Adventists, Catholics, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Christian Scientists, to name but a few. Such atrocity stories often depend on exclusive reliance upon former believers who have left a religion, often for reasons of perceived abuses, ranging from the physical to the psychological. Their narratives need not be doubted, and David is careful to document claims of abuse in diverse ways by former members of Pratt's church who have not only trusted him, but pleaded with him to let their stories be heard. However, it is important to remember that David does not have access to the narratives of believers who stayed within the tradition and who likely found

solace and comfort in a tradition that persists, in radically different form, today. Religions more in tension with their host cultures, especially small religious sects and cults, often have former members anxious to establish the validity of the atrocities committed in the name of the religion they abandoned. However, of course, there are members who continue to believe and see the atrocities as exceptions (for instance, many Catholics, horrified as they may be by particular instances, believe that cases of pedophilia among priests are isolated events) or endorse the alternative vision of a world others find difficult to accept (as with Christian Science). As Pratt's new religion was growing, its reliance upon faith rather than medicine to heal was common in an age in which effective medicine was in its infancy, when influenza was a modern plague and available medicines at best were weak alternatives to prayer. Likewise, Pratt's vision of a communal society (forget the dreaded phrase "communism") was once a popular ideal, and numerous groups supported and tried to practice what others now see as utopian efforts to transform society under a shared religious vision associated then as now with versions of democratic socialism.

However, despite the fact that David's work cannot help us understand the true believers who supported stages of the Union Assembly of the Church of God's transformations, he does reveal a dark side, undoubtedly real as narrated by those willing and anxious for David to tell their stories. Many were abused, and the atrocities of that abuse are self-evident in the words of those willing to talk to David. We need not attempt another amateur diagnosis of any of the Pratts to understand the abuse and atrocities imposed on at least some members of their church. Neither need we doubt David's chronicling of acts of deceit, financial deception, and the wealth amassed by the various generations of the Pratts who ruled their church with an iron hand. Neither do we need to use pseudo-scientific terms, such as "brainwashing," to understand the powerful coercive techniques employed to keep members from leaving (or, likely for David's confidants, escaping) what many thought had become a cult, a term fraught with confusion even among scholars of religion. It is not only cults and sects that skillfully use techniques of coercive persuasion; many mainstream religious groups do as well, all the more when they advocate beliefs or behaviors that stand in opposition to the larger host culture or when members appear to defy internal norms established by their practices. Attempts to isolate believers, to control access to alternative sources of information, and to shun those who would leave the fold are common in many traditions, some of which appeal to the larger culture that rejects them (e.g., Amish communities) and are hard on those who know that if they leave their loved ones likely will shun them. As harsh as this reality is, those who stay do so in support of beliefs and practices that force the reader to question atrocity less and then to ask who suffers. The Amish mother who shuns her daughter who has left the tradition could certainly be an atrocity tale for her daughter, but it would be half the story, which does not convey the whole truth about Amish community life.

It would be a mistake to take what is a remarkable book like this as definitive of any one understanding on what remains a religion, and, as David forthrightly acknowledges, is surely less a religion of fear now than it once was. David's documentation of its rapid growth, its amazing expansion, and the height of its wealth and power now diminished is a good read. It is also a powerful reminder that, whatever the ultimate truth claims of any religion, they are filtered through fallible humans, whose motivations are complex. David's book is more than a great telling of atrocity tales. It is a necessary source for religious scholars and historians to do justice to the narratives of those undoubtedly violated by a religion that scholars have little knowledge of, and David's book is a remarkable part of a larger story that religious scholars, and historians, and psychologists should address. They have a great start with David's extensive documentation of sources scholars are sure to find invaluable.

Ralph W. Hood Jr., PhD
Professor of Psychology & LeRoy A. Martin
Distinguished Professor of Religious Studies &
UT Alumni Association Distinguished Service Professor

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to extend my sincere thanks to those who helped me create *Religion of Fear*. Without their help and support, I might not have made it.

To those willing to be interviewed, I appreciate your sacrifice and time. I want to give special thanks to Charles Roberts, who kept me on track and provided me with guidance about what to believe and not believe from others' stories. To my lifetime friend Buddy Coiffure (a pseudonym to protect his identity), who also corroborated interviews, I want to say thank you. Among the group from Kokomo, I want to acknowledge former Union Assembly members Brenda Moore, Don Pitner, and especially Dorothy Bliss, who died just before getting to read her heartfelt experiences as a member of the Church in this book. I deeply appreciate former CGUA member Johnnie Haney Butler, who gave me her unpublished memoir and allowed me to ask her questions until a month before her death in 2017. I want to thank her sister, Martha Sue Johnson, for her moving interviews. I want to express my gratitude to Teresa Howard Coker, who gave me lots of interviews and was brave enough to come out and admit to her friends that she allowed me to interview her even though some of her friends in the Church unfriended her on Facebook for doing so. I am so grateful for Marie Hoskins Anderson and her husband Robert Anderson for coming to Dalton from Knoxville to give me a four-hour interview about their lives as members of the Church, and for their follow-up interviews in the weeks to come. I want to thank the three former Union Assembly members who now live in Hamilton, Ohio, for their hundreds of emails. I want to thank former US Congressman Harlan Erwin Mitchell, now deceased, for his interview. I want to thank the Pratt family members who talked with me anonymously and sent me great pictures of their family. Thank you to Tammy Magill, who contacted me from San Diego and gave me useful information. I must acknowledge Charlie Carmical. I know he got tired of seeing me come in his furniture store to ask him questions about his father and C. T. Pratt, but he was incredibly generous with his information. There were many others interviewed whose names do not appear here, but I really appreciated your information.

Thanks to Willis Treadwell of Forwell Studio, Inc. for helping me find and reproduce many pictures in this book. To Yong Son Painter of Fast Foto for helping me reproduce and restore many photos in this book.

Thanks especially to my wife, Cindy, who wasn't so excited about me writing this story in the beginning but finally became my strongest supporter. Once she got on board with this project, I relied heavily on her advice. During the few interviews she witnessed, Cindy asked better questions than I did.

Thanks to the early readers who lent a discerning eye to this manuscript: Bette Chesser, Brian Suits, Woody Glenn, and my lawyer and friend, Tracy Ward. Tracy also spent hours searching for documents that proved very useful for this work.

Thanks to my son, Craig Cady, who helped me record interviews and then guided me to seek out Dr. Ralph W. Hood, professor of psychology and religion at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga. Dr. Hood, who read my manuscript and saw enough potential in it to take it to Scot Danforth, the director of the University of Tennessee Press in Knoxville, deserves special thanks. Without Dr. Hood's unwavering assistance, continuing encouragement, and resolute dedication, my story might still be in a manuscript box in my basement.

To my publisher and editor, Scot Danforth, who spent so much time and effort with this project and made it read so much better. I know that I drove Scot crazy with my repeated stories. Also, many thanks go to Dr. W. Paul Williamson, Dr. Christopher Silver, and Dr. Donald Davis who critiqued this manuscript and gave boundless advice that improved it immensely. Thanks to Glenna Schroeder-Lein for her diligent work in creating the index.

Finally, to the members of the Church of God of the Union Assembly and the members of the Pratt family, I need to add that this story told herein is not without controversy—some of it is unquestionably explosive. I realize that many people represented in this story still have living relatives who may have deep feelings about these events and my interpretations of them. For the record, I would like to say that I strived to be fair to everyone involved—to find confirmation for each event I describe. Many stories were withheld because I failed to confirm the information. Some members may feel I have misrepresented them or their families by sharing these stories told to me by former and present members of the Church. Nevertheless, historians have to tell it like they see it. If I have made mistakes, please understand they were honest ones.

INTRODUCTION

The Beginning of the End

In October 1983, as the United States mourns 216 Marines killed in a Beirut truck bombing, the Church of God of the Union Assembly became nationally known. *The New York Times*, *The Chicago Sun Times*, and all the major news agencies in the United States came to Knoxville, Tennessee, and began asking questions about the religious practices of this church, which was fighting in the courts to allow a twelve-year-old preacher's daughter the right to refuse life-saving treatment for cancer. This preacher's daughter, Pamela Hamilton, had been taught by her church leaders that death and deliverance are better settled by God and not doctors or medication, and if she took medicine, she would go to hell.

It started in early July when Pamela complained about a pain in her left leg. After a month of suffering, her father, Larry Hamilton, pastor of the LaFollette Church of God of the Union Assembly, finally took her to a chiropractor, since visits to a chiropractor were allowed by her church. The practitioner, determining that Pamela's leg was broken, sent her to an orthopedic surgeon, who set the fracture and also took tissue samples of her leg—all allowed by her church. They discovered that she had Ewing's sarcoma, a rare bone cancer, in her thigh. When her parents refused to allow treatment for Pamela's condition because taking medication was against their religion, the Tennessee Department of Human Services sued for custody in Campbell County, Juvenile Court. Pamela's parents hired attorney James Alexander Hamilton Bell to represent them in the battle to keep Pamela from receiving medication. After two months of legal battle, the case finally went to court in mid-September in Knoxville, but by then Pamela's tumor had spread to cover her left leg from the hip to the knee.

By the beginning of October, Pamela's case received national attention and so did the Church of God of the Union Assembly. The reporters who came to Tennessee covering this trial started an investigation of the Union Assembly Church and word spread that this religious group could possibly be a cult. It had only been five years since the Jonestown Massacre had shocked the world, when on November 18, 1978, 912 people committed mass suicide in a religious cult led by Jim Jones. Since then

there had been movies and TV documentaries relating the story behind Jim Jones's cult, so the world had become fascinated with this self-destructive type of human behavior. After Pamela's story became public, many news agencies sent reporters to Knoxville to examine this Holiness religious group and its eccentric beliefs. These journalists quickly learned that the Union Assembly Church was much larger than first reported and had unconventional religious beliefs that were similar to cults.

Rick Soll, a journalist from the *Chicago Sun-Times*, investigated the Hamilton case and the church that was stopping her treatment. On October 7, 1983, he wrote two articles that were widely reprinted. In one article, Soll reported the situation facing Pamela's struggle, and the other he wrote about his investigation into this church:

Fundamentalist Fear: Former Church Members Paint Picture of Intimidation

KNOXVILLE, Tenn. (IPS).—Cotton Smith was a big guy with a wrecking ball head and eyes the size of Cheerios.

He had just caught a reporter inside the Knoxville Church of God of the Union Assembly.

Smith's face clouded over when the newsman mentioned that, customarily, churches are open to all.

"Ours ain't," he growled.

Smith's church—like Pamela Hamilton's church—is closed to outsiders.

But later, six former members of the Church of God of the Union Assembly revealed disturbing details that shed new light on cancer-stricken Pamela's faith.

The former members, who included two former pastors, painted for the *Chicago Sun-Times* a portrait of a religious organization of 4,000 in 17 states that controls its membership by intimidation, humiliation, ostracism, and strict enforcement of rules governing everything from marriage to the style of a woman's hair.

For example, said former members, they had to ask church elders for permission to leave town on Sunday.

"The idea was that if you were gone on Sunday, you wouldn't be there to make your weekly cash donation," said Manuel Smith, a former pastor of the Hamiltons' congregation. "Permission was granted as long as you made your donation before you left. If you didn't, they forced you to beg forgiveness from the entire congregation the next week."

In the late 1960s, Smith said, members were urged repeatedly to sell their homes and give the proceeds to the church. In return, he said they were told they would be moved to a church-owned site in Arizona, where leaders once planned to locate the entire membership.

"I was born into that church," said Smith, 58. "I might have stayed in it all my life."

But on a rainy Saturday night in 1979, sitting at home with a jumpy wife and ashtrays full of cigarette butts, Smith got the picture.

It was on his television screen.

“We were watching that movie they made about a crazy cult. And when it was over, we turn and look at each other. We was wide-eyed, kind of shaky. I says to her, ‘My God, do you believe it?’ See, a lot of them things in that movie—well, we had the same things going on in our church. Looking at that movie was like looking at ourselves.”

Today, the former members say, Pratt’s grandchildren run the church like “military dictators” from their headquarters in Dalton, Georgia. Smith hasn’t been allowed to see his mother, who has high blood pressure, since he left the church.

“I worry about her,” he said. “If I drive down to Dalton to see her, my brother gives me 10 minutes, and she won’t say a word to me. He won’t let me give her no medicine for her illness. She’s there suffering but too afraid to go against the church.”

Another former member, who asked not to be identified, is afraid her “escape” from the church would deprive her forever of seeing her mother. Last Christmas, she said her sister’s husband left the church as well, causing a split in their marriage.

On Christmas, she said, his children visited him and the church found out.

“During services, the kids had to ask the whole congregation’s forgiveness for violating church rules and visiting their dad,” she said.

The rules are as comprehensive as they are strict, said Estelle Paul, 68, another former member who left the church. His wife is threatening to leave him because of his decision.

“They can tell you who to marry, to sell your house, to empty your pockets and hand it over to the leader right then and there,” Paul said. “Any argument and you’re out.”

Efforts to contact church officials were unsuccessful.

At the top, there is the overseer. His name is Jesse Pratt Junior, grandson of founder Charles Thomas Pratt and son of Jesse Pratt Sr., whose picture hangs in every church in the Pratt domain.

“What happens,” said Manuel Smith’s wife, Mae, is that right off you all have to salute the picture, and you do it several more times during the service, too. It was as if you worshiped the Pratts.”

Another former member put it this way: “The leaders—you were taught to ask them for help, for forgiveness. You don’t ask God—you got a go through them.”

It was the leaders of the church who nurtured the faith of Pamela Hamilton.

During the court hearing to decide the issue of her medical care, Pamela had told the judge she was ready to die anytime “the Lord gets ready for me.”

At the same hearing, Pamela’s court-appointed guardian testified that he felt the girl was dominated by her father, and that, concerning her survival, she “had no independent thought on the matter.”

Dr. Frank Haraf, Pamela's cancer specialist, said the ten weeks spent in the legal battle over high principles reduced Pamela's chance of survival from 75 percent to 25 percent. The tumor had grown from the size of a baseball to the size of a watermelon.

What Pamela Hamilton thinks is not known. Behind all the battles and bitterness, there still remained only this: an eighty-six-pound girl in a private room at East Tennessee Children's Hospital—a child taught to believe her prayers were strong enough to beat cancer, and if not, that would be okay, too.¹

In most cases, members of this sect never mentioned the Church of God of the Union Assembly by name. They always referred to it simply the Church.² I was tempted to use all caps throughout the book, but my editor persuaded me that this would be a little wearying for the reader, so we settled on referring to the group as the Church.

RELIGION OF FEAR

PROLOGUE

The Devil in Chains

The following story evolved according to Minnie Pratt's book about her early life, from the Minutes of the Church of God Mountain Assembly, from the Minutes of the Church of God of the Union Assembly, and from the history of this year.

On April 6, 1917, the United States Congress voted to enter the war that had raged in Europe for three years. Millions of young men from all over the world had already lost their lives in The Great War—The War to End all Wars—and, twenty-one years later when Germany attacked Poland in 1939, its new name became, World War I. In 1917 President Woodrow Wilson would sign the declaration of war into law and in a speech say: “It is a fearful thing to lead this great peaceful people into war, the most terrible of all wars. But the right is more precious than the peace, and we shall fight for the things that we have always carried nearest our hearts—for democracy . . . for the rights and liberties of small nations . . .”¹

Nine days later on a Sunday evening, April 15, 1917, in the farming town of Middlesboro, Kentucky, only a few miles from the Tennessee state line, an ordained Holiness minister stood at a podium blaring out his sermon to a small group of members. Seated in the front row, across the aisle from the minister's wife and children, were a group of other ministers from other Church of God of the Mountain Assembly churches. These men—all men—who had made a special trip to be present that night, sat with grim faces full of disbelief as they glared up and listened to their fellow preacher who was denouncing their newly adopted doctrines on the connotation of the Millennium. They believed in the imminent physical return of Jesus Christ in the future.²

Outside the wooden structure, lightning flashed, illuminating the room, and thunder rumbled down the valley nestled between the majestic Cumberland Mountains. Rain, splattering off the tin roof, tried to drown out the words of this thirty-seven-year-old, thin, wiry man, but his voice held strong with determination as perspiration drenched his shirt and poured from his face and leaked onto the floor.³

As Charlie Thomas Pratt shouted and screamed his words, the other ministers began to yell “No!” as he tried to explain why they were wrong, and he was right. His loud voice boomed like the thunder as he refused to abandon his views while trying to explain what God had shown him in a dream. Rain pelted the windows and water ran down the panes just like the tears that ran down the cheeks of this preacher’s wife, Minnie Pratt. Minnie, already big with another child growing in her, sat on the front row with all five of their children and looked up at her tall husband as he continued to roar out why they would all go to hell if they didn’t listen to him. “It’s God’s way,” he scolded them. His tattered suit jacket lay in a chair beside the rostrum.

Charlie beat on the rostrum and in his booming voice shouted at the congregation that the people name everything wrong “the devil,” but everything wrong isn’t the devil—everything wrong is of the devil. Pratt quoted John 8:44 to show them that there was a difference between the devil and the children of the devil.⁴ The other Mountain Assembly ministers squirmed in their seats, and one started to speak, but Charlie belted out, “In a vision, God showed me Satan bound in chains; therefore the millennial reign of Christ has already begun; it is not in the future as you say.”⁵ He pointed to the group of ministers with a quivering finger. “Read your Bible. The children of the devil were to be here until the end of the world. Matthew the thirteenth chapter, verses 37 through 42.”⁶

One minister who had been seated on the front row stood and took one step forward, but Charlie stopped him by holding out his upturned palm on an extended arm. “Wait, Brother, there is proof.” Charlie had an open Bible in his other hand, but everyone knew he could not read a word from it. He had memorized all that he quoted from the Bible. Minnie would read to him from it, every night after the children went to bed.

Charlie glared at the old man standing and said in a voice now rasping with fatigue, “He, who was He? He was Jesus who answered and said unto them, he that soweth the good seed is the Son of Man. Jesus was talking about himself there in Matthew. The field is the world; the good seed are the children of the kingdom; but the tares are the children of the wicked one—the devil was who Jesus was talking about because in verse 39 He said, the enemy that sowed them is the devil: the harvest is the end of the world; and the reapers are the angels.”⁷

The ministers from the Church of God of the Mountain Assembly who were still standing commanded Charlie Pratt to stop preaching this doctrine, which was not in line with the dogma of the Mountain Assembly Church, and confess his sins of blasphemy.

Charlie countered with this response: “The Son of Man shall send forth his angels, and all things that offend them shall be cast into a furnace of fire. There shall be wailing and gnashing of teeth, and it will be you.”

One leader told Charlie he would be cast out of the Mountain Assembly Church if he did not stop this and confess to the general moderator that he was preaching the wrong doctrine.⁸

Charlie said, “I don’t owe him a confession and you haven’t put a padlock on my mouth.”⁹

Under total control, Charlie turned, picked up his coat, and took long quick strides off the platform to Minnie and wrapped his coat around her shoulders. The gathering grew quiet as the thunder’s rumbling shook the building. Only the rain splattering on the roof created any sound. Brother Charlie, taking Minnie by the hand, turned his back on his church family and led his pregnant wife and five children out the Mountain Assembly door into the rain. The seven of them—eight if you count unborn Jesse in Minnie’s womb—walked in the lightning and pouring rain two miles down the railroad track to the home of a friend by the name of Bledsoe, who would give them shelter, for they had no home.¹⁰ As bad as everything seemed, Charlie must have known that this event was a major turning point in his life, and it was. However, it would also change thousands and thousands of other lives.



The early Pratt family. *From left:* Lloyd, C. T. holding Flora, Minnie holding Estle, and Edmond, ca. 1912. Courtesy of an anonymous family member.