

Change at the Worldwide Church of God

On May 7, 1997, the Worldwide Church of God (WWCG) was voted into membership by the National Association of Evangelicals. Eighteen months earlier, their leader, Joseph Tkach, Sr., the successor of Herbert W. Armstrong, had publicly repudiated the necessity of Sabbath-keeping and obedience to the Law of God.

There are lessons here for those in our own denomination, in view of the fact that our own denomination is, in books and publications, openly repudiating the Bible Sabbath and obedience to God's law as being involved in the plan by which we are saved.

When Herbert W. Armstrong died in 1986 at the age of 92, *Plain Truth* editor, Greg Albrecht, recalls standing by his grave at the funeral, wondering what would happen to the church.

"He is dead now," Albrecht said, "and that began a giant upheaval in my worldview."

So powerful had been Armstrong's influence, that, for a short time after his death, some of his followers kept vigil by his gravestone, expecting to see angels come down, resurrect him, and escort him to heaven.

Joseph Tkach, Sr. had been handpicked, by Armstrong, to take over the leadership. He quickly gath-

ered about him a small group of men who were as willing as he was to make changes.

One by one, they discarded earlier teachings. At first, they worked slowly. Articles hinting at changes began to appear. New pastors were appointed, who had been trained by teachers willing to follow different paths than those blazed by Armstrong.

Books by Armstrong began going out of print. His picture came down from where it had hung in WWCG churches and schools.

Leaders, teachers, and pastors were discovering the books of outside theologians. Pluralism was in; historic beliefs were old-fashioned.

In just nine years, from 1986 to 1995, the denomination had been nearly remodeled into a new image.

But, with each step away from the historic beliefs, members left and formed independent groups. Some united in larger splinter groups.

All this sounds so much like what we are going through.

Then came the final blow: Tkach, Sr., came out openly in the *Plain Truth* and denied the necessity of Sabbathkeeping as having anything to do with salvation.

He wrote that Christians were now living under "the new covenant," and no longer needed to obey the law of God.

When Joseph Tkach, Sr., died in 1995, his son, Joseph Tkach, Jr.,

was made president—and continued the same modernist stance, on down to the present time.

Yes, 1995 was indeed the bombshell year for WWCG. Large numbers of believers forsook the denomination. Church headquarters went into a crisis mode, but refused to reverse itself. Leaders refused to turn back. They adamantly pressed forward in their objective. But what was it? The people in the pews who were leaving could not understand what was happening. However, lax members who had hankered more for the world loved it. Now they could obtain divorces more easily and still retain their church membership. They could get a job on the Bible Sabbath and not be kicked out. People were free to live without being hampered by any Biblical rules. They were saved by grace!

Like many in our own denomination, the more worldly WWCG members loved the opportunities for loose living, they no longer had to bother with enabling grace; they only wanted forgiving grace.

Sin as you like, they were told. Heaven is your home. You were saved on the cross by Christ, and all you need to do is verbally accept it. You do not even need to pay tithe anymore.

Does all this sound familiar? It ought to. Our denomination has been following a parallel course for a far longer time than the Tkachs.

When those faithful to historic positions were told they need no longer obey God's law, pay tithe, or keep the Bible Sabbath, droves left the church.

Today much of the 30-acre Pasadena church headquarters is empty. A security guard and receptionist are the only people visible on the massive first floor of the administration hall. Other buildings are shuttered, and the great reflecting pools outside Ambassador Auditorium are dry.

All three universities are closed, the television programs have been discontinued, and the monthly circulation of *Plain Truth* magazine, which once was free to 8 million, is now a paid 125,000.

Annual income has dropped from \$200 million to \$50 million, and membership has plunged almost in half.

Dixon Cartwright, publisher of *The Journal*, an independent publication which keeps close tabs on the various Churches of God, says that three major breakaway denominations have formed (one is called the *Global Church of God*), and the number of informal splinter groups throughout the world numbers over a thousand.

Sound familiar? We may be looking at our own future. There are leaders in our denomination who are as

determined today to take us out into ecumenical Protestantism and Pentecostalism, as were the Tkachs and their associates.

Finally, on May 7, 1997, the WWCG was voted into membership by the National Association of Evangelicals. This was an astounding event, coming only eleven years after the death of Herbert W. Armstrong, who once castigated the Catholic Church as the Babylonian whore of Revelation, whose daughters were the Protestant churches.

David Briggs, of the Associate Press, said it this way:

"How great a change is this? You can't compare it to the Mormons' decision to give up polygamy to assimilate with American culture. Instead, it would be more like the Mormons suddenly becoming Baptists!" (*Associated Press release, June 22, 1997.*)

Eighteen months earlier, their leader, Joseph Tkach, Sr., had publicly repudiated the necessity of Sabbathkeeping and obedience to the Law of God. —*Only eighteen months to make a complete changeover!*

Just think how fast changes will be made when the National Sunday Law is enacted, and you—and our leaders—could share prison cells for keeping the Bible Sabbath! Changes will be made in the blink of an eye

when that time comes.

We can be thankful that Ellen White's books are all out-of-copyright, and anyone can now print them. Gerald Flurry, of Edmond, Oklahoma, pastor of an offshoot WWCG church which remains with Armstrong's earlier positions, has reprinted Armstrong's 1985 book, *Mystery of the Ages*. But, in February of this year, the WWCG filed a copyright lawsuit to forbid Flurry from distributing it! They do not want the public to learn or accept the historic beliefs of the denomination.

Similar persecution could come to Advent believers. Spirit of Prophecy books have already been burned in some areas.

We live in momentous times. Read the Bible and Spirit of Prophecy as though your eternal life depended on it. For it does.

Only a small stone marker, tucked in a nondescript corner of the Mountain View Cemetery in Altadena, California, denotes the burial place of the writer/speaker who used radio and television to build an international church, complete with three universities and a magnificent 50-acre headquarters in California.

But other men came in afterward; and, in eleven years, they effectively abolished all that he had done.

Herbert Armstrong's teachings are far different than ours. His came from human reasoning; ours came from the God of heaven.

But there were similarities, just as the members of the Worldwide Church of God were led away by modernists from obedience, by faith in Christ, to the Ten Commandments; so our people can be led away also.

Yet it would be of interest to know more about the background of Armstrong's denomination. Here is a brief, and surprising, overview:

Herbert W. Armstrong was born, in 1894, into a Quaker family in Des Moines, Iowa. By the age of 16, by his own account, he "was burning with desire to go somewhere in life—to become a success!" When he became 18, he began a three-year stint as advertising and promotional man, writing copy for the *Merchants Trade Journal* in Des Moines, Iowa (1912-1915). Moving to Chicago, his advertising career ended in 1920 in

a "flash depression." On his 25th birthday, he married Loma Dillon, his third cousin. Moving to Oregon when he was 30, he began advertising for laundries. By 1926, he was making \$1,000 a month; but then that failed, when the advertising was assigned to a national ad firm.

That same year, his wife told him she found that the Bible said people should keep the commandments of God. This was a startlingly new thought to Herbert.

The very idea that his wife would have such "religious fanaticism" and keep the Bible Sabbath was intolerable to him. His words describe him as a man who was proud and very sure of his astute abilities:

"I thought I could not tolerate such humiliation . . . Why, what would my friends say? What would former business acquaintances think!"—*H.W.A., Autobiography of Herbert W. Armstrong, Vol. 1, 1967, 282.*

"I will give you just one more chance, before we separate and get a divorce," I said. "I don't know just

where it is, but I know all these churches can't be wrong! I know it's in the Bible that we are to keep Sunday! I'll give you this one more chance, before you break up our home. I won't tolerate fanaticism! I'll make you this proposition: I have an analytical mind. I've been trained in research into business problems, getting the facts and analyzing them. Now I'll make a complete and thorough research into the Bible. I'll find where the Bible commands us to observe Sunday. I'll prove it to you out of the Bible! Will you give up this fanaticism when I prove it?' —
Op. cit., 284.

After convincing himself of the Bible Sabbath, in 1927 he asked a Baptist preacher to baptize him "into Christ." The next year, he joined a Missouri offshoot of the Adventist Church, which he abandoned awhile later after quarreling with them over a leadership position. (More on this later, when we discuss doctrine.)

Armstrong began writing and preaching. In June 1931 in Eugene, Oregon, he held his first evangelistic campaign.

Still living in Eugene, he founded *Plain Truth* magazine in February 1934. At first, it was a mimeographed bulletin. The previous month, he started a radio broadcast. Originally called the *Radio Church of God*, it was later to be renamed *The World Tomorrow*.

The movement grew slowly until 1946, when Armstrong launched an intense radio and traveling campaign to increase membership. Touring around, he baptized listeners into his church.

Herbert Armstrong had great confidence in his ability to devise new, correct interpretations of religion. It was only matched by his self-confidence in promoting whatever he believed in. According to Herbert, He was God's gift to mankind:

"Jesus chose Paul, who was highly educated, for spreading the Gospel to the Gentiles. He later raised up Peter Waldo, a successful businessman, to keep His truth alive during the Middle Ages. In these last days . . . Jesus chose a man amply trained in the advertising ad business fields to shoulder the mission—**HERBERT W. ARMSTRONG.**"—*H.W.A., quoted in Paul N. Benware, Ambassadors of Armstrongism: An Analysis of the History and Teachings of the Worldwide Church of God, 1975, 25 [emphasis Armstrong's]*.

Additional quotations could be given, showing the strong element of egotism in the man!

Armstrong specialized in radio. He later added on television. By the early 1980s, he sponsored more radio broadcasts and television programs on more stations than any other minor denomination in the world; in fact, more than its five top competitors combined. Radio Luxembourg and other stations beamed Armstrong's messages all over Europe and behind the Iron Curtain.

Over the years, Armstrong gained quite a following in the United States, Canada, England, and in Eu-

rope. Because he taught Anglo-Israelism, he became popular wherever people of English descent lived throughout the world.

Armstrong developed a taste for private jet planes and meetings with world leaders. He considered himself a senior statesman, and would fly to faraway places and visit with the heads of nations. They were glad to visit with him for a few hours, since he brought them expensive gifts (such as Steuben-cut glassware), as well as giving them funds to help the poor in their nation. Whether or not the money ever reached the poor was not always known.

Armstrong started these "ambassador" trips, at the suggestion of Stanley Rader, one of his associates. Gradually, more and more money was siphoned into these activities. Millions of dollars in church funds were diverted to this and to his celebrity concerts at an immense hall he constructed in Pasadena. The denomination was nearing bankruptcy. This led to a lawsuit filed in California by certain members in 1978, which, in 1980, placed the church in receivership.

He also sponsored archaeological digs in various Near Eastern countries. One of these was his well-publicized funding of Israeli excavations around, and underneath, the site of the second Temple in Jerusalem.

No analysis would be complete without mentioning Garner Ted Armstrong. Handsome and articulate, as a child he wanted to be a nightclub performer. After high school, he joined the navy; but, in 1923, he returned home to Dad. Four years later, at 27, Herbert had made his son a regular speaker on the radio.

But, from 1960 onward, Garner was increasingly involved in adultery and Los Vegas gambling. Repeatedly, the father censured or expelled him. Each time he took him back in. In 1973, Armstrong named Garner his successor. Regarding his known adultery, the father said, "Ted is divinely called" and "above the Scripture" (*H.W.A., quoted in W.C. Martin, "Father, Son, and Mammon," Atlantic Monthly, March 1980, 60*).

The final break came in 1978, when Garner tried to seize control of the organization while his father was ill. Herbert kicked him out for good.

Armstrong had always strictly forbidden divorce. But then, in 1977, he decided to divorce his wife and marry a divorcée 45 years younger than himself. In 1982, he divorced his second wife. Finalized in 1984, he died less than two years later at the age of 93.

What were Herbert Armstrong's teachings?

He started out well, for the Bible taught him that mankind should obey God's holy law, by faith in Christ. Unfortunately, Herbert was not satisfied to remain with the "plain truth," as given in God's Word. Gradually, he wandered off into various novelties.

For a time, Armstrong united with B.F. Snook and W.H. Brinkerhoff's organization. These were two apostate Seventh-day Adventist ministers who started the infamous "*Marian Party*" in 1886. This is a well-known

offshoot in our own history. Hating Ellen White's writings, the two started a splinter group in Iowa. In 1889, they centered their work in Stanbury, Missouri, and called their company the *Church of God (Adventist)*.

What a group to become involved with! Armstrong joined these Spirit of Prophecy haters; but, after a stormy experience, he separated from them in a dispute over who would be leader.

Armstrong, ever the consummate promoter, worked with a Mr. Duggar, in leading off a sizeable number of Snook and Brinkerhoff followers into a new group, which were called the *Church of God (Seventh-day)*,

Sometime later, because of Armstrong's positions on British Israelism, he separated once again, this time calling his church the *World Church of God*. Later still, he changed it to *Worldwide Church of God*.

It is for such reasons that, in a series of articles in the *Bulletin of the Ministerial Association of Seventh-day Adventist Ministers*, George Burnside wrote that "Mr. Armstrong is an offshoot of an offshoot of an offshoot of the Seventh-day Adventist Church." (Burnside, a well-known powerful Australian evangelist in the 1950s and 1960s, was hounded out of the Adventist ministry in the 1980s for opposing the new theology. He passed to his rest only a few years ago.)

It turns out that the neighbor lady, who initially revealed the great truth about the law of God to Armstrong's wife, was a Seventh-day Adventist. Unfortunately, Herbert afterward got in with the wrong people, who turned him against the Spirit of Prophecy.

Yet Armstrong's theology paralleled ours in a number of ways: the observance of the Seventh-day Sabbath, abstinence from certain articles of food as unclean, and his denunciation of eternal punishment. He also had a system of eschatology (last day events), yet quite different from our own.

But, oh, what grotesque errors he came up with!

Armstrong taught that the blood of Christ only wipes away past sins, but our obedience in our own strength to the law is what saves us. This, of course, is radically different than historic Adventism.

Like Jehovah's Witnesses, he did not believe that Christ is eternally divine, that the Holy Spirit has existence, or that Christ had a bodily resurrection.

Like the Mormons, Armstrong taught that man can eventually become fully God.

"Do you really grasp it? The *purpose* of your being alive is that finally you be born into the Kingdom of God, when you will actually *be God*, even as Jesus was and is God, and His Father, a different Person, also is God! You are setting out on a training to become creator—to become *God!*"—*H.W.A., Why Were You Born? 22 [emphasis his]*.

Armstrong taught Anglo-Israelism (also known as British-Israelism). This theory, first taught by Richard Brothers (1757-1824), was the concept that the "lost tribes of Israel," which were taken captive over 2,500 years ago by Assyria, managed to migrate to the Brit-

ish Isles! (Howard Rand, the man who published in the early 1980s that Sabbathkeepers should be killed, also espoused that error.) Imagining that they were more likely to be saved, those of English descent (including many Americans) have been flattered by this teaching into accepting it.

The largest of the groups promoting Anglo-Israelism was Armstrong's church. Armstrong maintained that the Jews are racially different than Israel, those who are the descendants of the Anglo-Saxons.

Here is an example of his foolish reasoning:

"Elizabeth II actually sits on the throne of King David of ISRAEL—and she is a direct descendant, continuing David's dynasty—the VERY THRONE on which Christ shall sit after His return . . . Elizabeth II was crowned 'Queen of thy people Israel' . . . The throne upon which she was crowned [i.e. the 'Stone of Scone,' lodged in Westminster Abbey] is really the stone which Jacob used for a pillow, which he took with him when he departed from Bethel, and which later came under the care of Jeremiah the Prophet, who took it with him to England, where it became the Coronation Stone for the British (Davidic) dynasty."—*Plain Truth, June 1953*.

Scientific analysis reveals that the Stone of Scone is "calcareous, a sandstone of a reddish or purplish color, with heterogeneous pebbles and of Scottish origin" (*W.H. Smith, The Ten Tribes of Israel Never Lost, 91*).

Armstrong also taught that all the Jewish feast days, new moons, and festivals must be kept—or one would be lost. He also taught that one did not receive the new birth until the moment of resurrection from the dead; at which time (if he was a faithful follower of Armstrong, and only Armstrong) he would become God in fullest essence of nature and ability.

He also taught a form of universalism: During the coming millennial reign of Christ, the entire world would begin to be converted and everyone would ultimately be saved.

"As Lord of lords Christ will begin to convert and save the entire world during His reign . . . all peoples will then come to know God. Their blindness and religious confusion will be removed and they will finally be converted. The resurrected saints will teach the people God's way."—*Plain Truth, October 1959*.

Armstrong also taught that Christ was merely a human who happened to be the first one to achieve full perfection (*H.W.A., Why Were You Born? 15*).

With such peculiar errors, a change surely was needed. Yet the correct doctrines (those that Armstrong first received, the Bible Sabbath and obedience to God's law) were thrown out also. Those were the teachings he got from Adventists; not from his own speculations!