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Herbert W. Armstrong and His "Radio Church of God": Part 1

Robert L. Odom (<https://www.ministrymagazine.org/authors/odom,-robert-l>)

Biographical

THE editorial office of The Ministry has received numerous inquiries concerning Herbert W. Armstrong, spokesman of the "Radio Church of God," which broadcasts its teachings by radio and by mail from Pasadena, California. The most frequent question is this: Has Mr. Armstrong ever been connected with the Seventh-day Adventist Church?

Mr. Armstrong has had the same question put to him. In fact, he has said in his official monthly magazine: "It seems unnecessary to add here that I have *never* been a member of the Seventh-day Adventist denomination. False statements have appeared in various church or religious magazines, pamphlets or tracts that I am a former Seventh-day Adventist." ¹

On a previous occasion he wrote: "Although I have stated positively and definitely on the radio program a number of times that I never belonged to the sect known as 'Jehovah's Witnesses,' or the Seventh-day Adventist denomination, it seems that many, especially of the 'Jehovah's Witnesses' sect continue spreading the false claim that I once belonged to them. Let me now make the truth PLAIN. I have *never* been a member of these so-called 'Jehovah's Witnesses,' nor of the Seventh-day Adventists. I have never in any manner, shape, nor form, had any remote connection with them, or associated with either sect or denomination. I have never had any fellowship with them." ²

These statements by Mr. Armstrong, indicate that many people who listen to his radio broadcasts and read his literature have not been wholly satisfied with his assertion that he has "never in any manner, shape, nor form, had any remote connection with" the Seventh-day Adventist denomination. Hence it is necessary that we set the record straight in so far as the Seventh-day Adventist Church is concerned.

Quaker Background

We gather from Mr. Armstrong's biographical sketches that he was born on July 31, 1892, ³ which means that he is now nearing the age of threescore and ten years. Concerning his early religious background, he has said: "I had been brought up from birth in the Friends Church (Quakers)." ⁴ Again: "I was born of solid Quaker stock." ⁵ Likewise: "I had been reared of Quaker stock." ⁶ Also, "I was reared in the Sunday school of the Friends Church." ⁷

Methodist Connection

On July 31, 1917—his twenty-fifth birthday—Mr. Armstrong was married ⁸ and this resulted in a change of religious profession for him in 1920. Concerning this he says: "Before our marriage my wife had been quite interested in Bible study. She had been for years an active Methodist. After marriage, although she had not lost her interest in the Christian life and the Bible, she had not had the same opportunity

to express it, or participate in religious fellowship with others. While we lived in Maywood, suburb of Chicago, we joined the River Forest Methodist church, but the fellowship there had been more social than spiritual or Biblical." ⁹

"After moving to Maywood, my wife and I decided we ought to join a church. We attended a few to look them over. We rather liked the pastor and the people of the River Forest Methodist church, so we joined—more from social preference than theological." ¹⁰

Sabbath Observance

Mr. Armstrong's next change of religious profession had its beginning while he was living in Salem, Oregon, in 1926. At that time his "wife had become acquainted with an elderly neighbor lady, Mrs. Ora Runcorn," who convinced her that the seventh day of the week, and not Sunday, was the true Sabbath day. ¹¹ Mrs. Armstrong began to keep the Sabbath thereafter. Heretofore the Armstrongs had assumed that the teachings and practice of the various large denominations were based on the Bible. Hence he says: "In early fall in 1926 that assumption had been rudely challenged. My wife had accepted the seventh-day Sabbath." ¹² He gives the date again thus: "My wife, in early fall of 1926, had begun to observe the seventh-day Sabbath." ¹³

After investigating the Sabbath question for six months, Mr. Armstrong also became convinced that the seventh day was the Sabbath, and began to keep it. In telling of this experience, he says: "It was probably May or June, 1927, when I was baptized." ¹⁴

Affiliation With Church of God (of Stanberry, Missouri)

Into what denominational fellowship did Mr. Armstrong enter as a result of this change in religious profession? He speaks of it as the "almost unknown little Church of God with its small publishing house in Stanberry, Missouri." ¹⁵ He describes it further as "a little church, with scattered members probably numbering less than 2,000, mostly in rural areas. Apparently, as nearly as I could learn, it had only a very limited number of local churches, none as large as 100 members." ¹⁶ He adds that "there were at that time [1927] perhaps 35 to 50 members of the church in Oregon, from Salem to Eugene." ¹⁷ He identifies that denomination again as "a little, almost-unheard-of church called the Church of God, which maintained a small publishing-house headquarters at Stanberry, Missouri." ¹⁸

That little church group is a ninety-six-year-old offshoot from the Seventh-day Adventist Church. In 1866 Elders B. F. Snook and W. H. Brinkerhoff, two leading ministers of the small constituency of the newly organized Iowa Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, apostatized and led off some of our church members to form a small independent group of their own liking. ¹⁹ They directed their activities from Marion, Iowa, where they published a paper called *The Hope of Israel*. In 1889 they moved the headquarters of their work to Stanberry, Missouri, and changed their paper's name to *The Bible Advocate*. Until about 1949 the group called themselves the "Church of God (Adventist)." ²⁰ In 1906 they reported a membership of 354. By 1916 it stood at 848. In 1926—the year when Mrs. Armstrong began to keep the Sabbath with them—it was listed as 1,686. ²¹

We do not know whether Mr. Armstrong has been aware of this historical fact that the Church of God with which he fellow-shipped was an offshoot from the Seventh-day Adventist Church. But we are certain that he was well aware of the fact that some of its leading lights with whom he fellow-shipped in Oregon were formerly members of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

Not long after his baptism Mr. Armstrong began to give talks to his fellow believers and to write articles for *The Bible Advocate* published in Stanberry, Missouri, some of which were used by that paper. Ere long he sent a sixteen-page typewritten manuscript, which he regarded as proving "beyond contradiction that a certain minor point of doctrine proclaimed by this church, based on an erroneous interpretation of a certain verse of Scripture, was in error." ²² It was rejected by "their head man, editor of their paper and president of their 'General Conference.'" ²³ "Naturally, this shook my confidence considerably," ²⁴ he says.

A little later he wrote a typewritten manuscript of nearly three hundred pages which, he supposed, "proved that the so-called 'lost ten tribes' of Israel had migrated to north-western Europe, the British Isles, and later the United States—that the British were the descendants of Ephraim, younger son of Joseph, and the United States modern-day Manasseh, elder son of Joseph." ²⁵ This document was rejected by the publishing house at Stanberry. Mr. Armstrong's reaction to this was: "Truly, this was bewildering!" ²⁶

A Church of God minister, visiting Oregon about that time, visited Mr. Armstrong in Portland. After talking with him, the visitor advised the editor of *The Bible Advocate* not to publish any more of his articles. ²⁷ Mr. Armstrong in the meantime had been worshiping with a certain Mr. Hobbs and other persons "who met together in a little church building at the top of the hill, on the Molalla Road, in Oregon City. There were only around eight to twelve of them, but they habitually met on Sabbath afternoons to study the 'Sabbath school lesson,' using the 'quarterlies' from the Stanberry publishing house." ²⁸

Concerning Mr. Hobbs, he says: "Probably the most influential member in the state at the time was elderly G. A. Hobbs, of Oregon City. He was past 80 years of age, but very alert, aggressive and active. He had received a letter from the editor in Stanberry, Missouri, explaining that my articles were being discontinued at the request of the young minister newly arrived in Oregon. . . . This had aroused the fiery indignation of Brother Hobbs. Immediately he sent a scorching letter back to Stanberry, a copy of which he let me read. It resulted in reinstating my articles for publication."²⁹ That occurred in 1928.

In November of 1930 the followers of the Church of God in Oregon, in a business meeting held near Jefferson, Oregon, formed what they called their "Oregon Conference." Mr. Armstrong himself was present. He states: "I believe that the elderly G. A. Hobbs of Oregon City, previously mentioned, was made the first president of this state conference, and that O. J. Runcorn, with whom I had come to this meeting, was president the second year."³⁰

This G. A. Hobbs, according to Mr. Armstrong, "had been an Adventist since a young man—probably beginning somewhere around 1870, or perhaps earlier. Adventists during those earlier years were very strict, legalistic, and exacting. Brother Hobbs had left the Adventists rather late in life when he saw clearly, in the Bible, that the millennium will be spent on earth and not in heaven."³¹

However, Mr. Armstrong reports that "a son of our [Oregon] conference president, the elderly G. A. Hobbs, now well along in his eighties, was a local elder in the Seventh-day Adventist Church"³² at Umapino, Oregon, which is near Walla Walla, Washington.

At the request of the newly organized Oregon conference officers, Mr. Armstrong conducted his first evangelistic meetings at Harrisburg, Oregon. At the close of this effort he was reprimanded for having baptized four converts, because he was only a licensed and not an ordained minister. This upset him considerably.³³

With Another Former Seventh-day Adventist

In June of 1931 Mr. Armstrong was ordained as a minister.³⁴ He states thus: "I was the green-horn tail-ender among the ministers of the Church of God (world headquarters then Stanberry, Missouri)."³⁵ His former connection with the Stanberry, Missouri, organization is, therefore, a fact established by his own testimony.

In telling how he came to be ordained, Mr. Armstrong gives the principal credit to a former member of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. He says: "In the early summer of that year [1931] a former S.D.A. minister, a Robert L. Taylor, came to Oregon from California."³⁶ The Church of God people in Oregon asked him to conduct an evangelistic effort for them. "Brethren," said Elder Taylor, "I will be glad to undertake this evangelistic campaign, and I suggest holding it in Eugene. But I want to request that Brother Armstrong be put full time into the ministry, and join me in the campaign." . . . The members of the conference agreed instantly with Mr. Taylor's suggestion. . . . Mr. Taylor's suggestion meant a complete change in my life. In former years the idea of becoming a minister was the very *last* thing I should have wanted to do. But by June, 1931, I had been preaching a great deal for three and a half years. By this time my whole heart was in it. . . . It was decided by the officers of the conference that on the next all-day meeting I was to be ordained, so I could join Elder Taylor in the campaign at Eugene. I shall never forget that moment of my ordination. The meeting was being held outdoors. I do not remember where—except it was in the general rural area of Jefferson. I do not remember other circumstances, except that one or two other ministers were there in addition to Elder Taylor."³⁷

Not long after he began to work with him, Mr. Armstrong began to be very critical of Mr. Taylor and his methods of evangelism.³⁸ In November of 1931—the same year of his ordination—Mr. Armstrong was dropped from the payroll of the Oregon conference and Mr. Taylor was continued on it.³⁹ Thereafter Mr. Armstrong worked as a solicitor of advertising for a newspaper in Astoria, Oregon, for about fifteen months.⁴⁰

With a Third Former Seventh-day Adventist

Early in 1933, prior to April 21, Mr. Armstrong was invited to return to ministerial work by the Oregon conference. In the meantime Mr. Armstrong came into contact -with "a former Seventh-day Adventist minister, Sven (Sam) Oberg, whom he [A. J. Ray] wanted as the Oregon minister."⁴¹ "Mr. Oberg was a man of 53."⁴² Mr. Armstrong's new assignment was to work with Mr. Oberg in an evangelistic campaign in Salem, Oregon.⁴³ He says that he then looked upon Mr. Oberg "with a sort of awe, feeling I had never met a person so perfect and so righteous and so powerful in preaching."⁴⁴

Mr. Armstrong's high regard for Mr. Oberg did not last very long. He became very critical of his associate, and antagonism between the two grew so strong that the conference president called a business meeting to deal with the case.⁴⁵

Affiliation With Church of God (of Salem, West Virginia)

Mr. Armstrong's stormy experience with the Church of God organization, whose headquarters were at Stanberry, Missouri, did not continue much longer. A dispute over denominational leadership and policies arose among its leading men, one of the most prominent being Andrew N. Dugger, who had been editor of their paper and also their general conference president. ⁴⁶ Mr. Dugger led off a sizable part of their followers and established a new denomination called the Church of God (Seventh Day), with headquarters in Salem, West Virginia. This occurred on November 4, 1933. ⁴⁷ About the same time or not long afterward Mr. Armstrong joined the revolt.

Several years ago, when my attention was called to the doctrines propagated by Mr. Armstrong, I noted a great similarity between many of his teachings and those of the Church of God (Adventist) which had its headquarters at Stanberry, Missouri. I wrote a letter to that office to ask if Mr. Armstrong had ever been connected with their organization. The reply was: "Mr. Herbert Armstrong is not now a member of the Church of God (Seventh Day). He used to be, years ago, but broke away and became independent since." ⁴⁸

I wrote also to the office of the Church of God (Seventh-day, Apostolic) at Salem, West Virginia, to inquire if Mr. Armstrong had ever been connected with their organization. The reply was: "Thank you for your inquiry concerning Herbert W. Armstrong. Several years ago this man was a minister of our faith. However, he jumped the track on British-Israelism, and a few other connected subjects, so he went off independent." ⁴⁹

In response to an inquiry that I made directly to Mr. Armstrong himself regarding his former connections with those two church organizations, he kindly replied:

"It is true that I fellowshiped and worked with the Stanberry church, beginning some 27 years ago, and was ordained by their Oregon Conference in 1931. Also that, about 1934, along with most of the Oregon brethren with whom I worked, I went along for a couple of years with that organization (Salem, West Virginia)." ⁵⁰

To confirm further what I had learned about Mr. Armstrong's connection with the two above-mentioned organizations called the Church of God, I wrote A. N. Dugger for information, for he was connected with both groups while Mr. Armstrong worked with them. He replied: "It was the year 1933 when Elder Armstrong separated from Stanberry and went along with about 100 or more ministers organizing the church at Salem [West Virginia] on the Bible foundation of church organization, with the twelve, the seventy, and the seven. He became one of the seventy at that time, chosen so by lot. He remained in this place for a few years. I do not remember just how many, but he broke with the Salem organization over the keeping of the yearly sabbaths set forth in Leviticus, 23rd chapter," et cetera. ⁵¹

Mr. Armstrong, in relating publicly his experience during the winter of 1933-34, says that he was appointed as a member of the board of seventy set up by the party at Salem, West Virginia, and that he "decided to go along with it," and sent in to it regularly his ministerial reports. ⁵²

Radio Church of God Started

Mr. Armstrong's next important step after breaking with the party that had its headquarters in West Virginia was to move the center of his independent religious activities out of Oregon. In 1946 he purchased some property in Pasadena, California, for his new headquarters and a college. From there he issues his monthly paper *The Plain Truth*, and directs his radio broadcast "The World Tomorrow." ⁵³

The *Ambassador College Bulletin* (catalog) for 1958-1960 speaks of the founder as "Herbert W. Armstrong, President and Pastor of the Churches of God." ⁵⁴ A letter from the office of "The World Tomorrow" radio broadcast says: "In 1946 the members incorporated under the name, 'The Radio Church of God,' since that name had become nationally known through the broadcast." ⁵⁵ Just how Mr. Armstrong perpetuates himself in office as president and founder of the Churches of God, ⁵⁶ and to what extent the machinery of his ecclesiastical organization is like that of other religious denominations, we do not know. Inquiry on my part has revealed that it has few local pastors and churches or congregations assembling weekly in church buildings or meeting places in towns and cities throughout the country. However, Mr. Armstrong's radio broadcasting has extended to Europe, and his organization appears to be financially prosperous.

He has built a large tabernacle on a woodland property of 43 acres near Gladewater, Texas, for holding annual assemblies of his radio listeners. He says of it: "Why are we building this tabernacle in northeastern Texas? The answer is simple. Because this location is the geographical center of the thickest density of our radio listening audience." ⁵⁷

Not a Seventh-day Adventist

Many people have mistakenly supposed that Mr. Armstrong is a Seventh-day Adventist minister, but he is not. *In so far as we know, he has never been connected with the Seventh-day Adventist Church.* This he has repeatedly affirmed, as we have shown by his own statements. However, he has acquainted himself with the teachings of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Speaking of the six months that he spent in investigating the subject of the Sabbath, prior to his beginning to keep it in 1927, Mr. Armstrong says: "I became quite familiar with Seventh-day Adventist literature."⁵⁸ Again: "So I examined Seventh-day Adventist teachings. I obtained their magazines, their booklets and pamphlets, their large 'catechism'—or book of Bible readings, or Bible 'home instructor.' "⁵⁹

Also: "I have attended a very few week-night evangelistic campaign services conducted by Seventh-day Adventist evangelists."⁶⁰ Likewise: "I have *never* been a member of the Seventh-day Adventist denomination. ... I did obtain much of their literature to compare with the Bible. I did examine and study it with an open mind, and without prejudice. I was happy to find that, like most denominations, they do have certain points of truth."⁶¹ At the same time he wrote: "My familiarity with Adventist doctrines has come entirely through their published literature, and a few personal contacts. I have never attended a regular Sabbath church service of that denomination!"⁶²

Moreover, while he was investigating the Sabbath question he sought information from a Seventh-day Adventist minister. Of this he says: "I went to a Seventh-day Adventist minister. He, too, was courteous and glad to explain his belief, according to the Bible, but my personal impression was that he was rather cold and legalistic."⁶³ Besides this, he attended a baptismal service conducted by a Church of God minister in a Seventh-day Adventist church one Sunday afternoon,⁶⁴ and at a later date Mr. Armstrong himself conducted a baptismal service in a Seventh-day Adventist church by arrangement with its local elder.⁶⁵

Summary

To state the matter briefly, if the "Radio Church of God" headed by Herbert W. Armstrong has "had any remote connection with" the Seventh-day Adventist Church, it cannot be construed as anything more than a mere offshoot from an offshoot from an offshoot from the Seventh-day Adventist body. The Church of God that had headquarters at Stanberry, Missouri, with which he was connected from 1927 to 1933, started out as an offshoot from the Iowa Conference of Seventh-day Adventists in 1866. Whether Mr. Armstrong has ever been aware of this historical fact or not, we do not know. The Church of God that had headquarters at Salem, West Virginia, with which he was connected later, started out as an offshoot from the organization that had headquarters at Stanberry, Missouri, in 1933. The "Radio Church of God," with headquarters now in Pasadena, California, was started by Mr. Armstrong after he pulled away from the organization that had headquarters at Salem, West Virginia. The role that former Seventh-day Adventists played in the story of Mr. Armstrong as a Sabbath-keeper has been conspicuous, though obviously not wholesome, as he himself has testified.

However, Mr. Armstrong is decidedly opposed to Seventh-day Adventism, and he attacks some of its doctrines. His teachings that Christ died on Wednesday noon and rose on the Sabbath, that the Lord's Supper should be eaten once a year and only at Passover time, that the Jewish calendar and its yearly festivals as outlined in Leviticus 23 should be followed and observed by Christians, that the people of Great Britain and the United States are descendants of Ephraim and Manasseh, and several of his predictions about Armageddon and other matters of prophecy are regarded by Seventh-day Adventists as erroneous and without Scripture support.

1 *The Plain Truth*, Aug., 1959, p. 14 (Radio Church of God, Pasadena, California).

2 *Ibid.*, July, 1953, p. 5.

3 *Ibid.*, Tune, 1958, p. 18; Aug., 1958, pp i. 8. 10, 18; Nov 1958. p. 23; Dec. 1958, p. 1; Feb., 1959, p. 17.

4 *Ibid.*, July, 1953, p. 5.

5 *Ibid.*, July, 1958, p. 18.

6 *Ibid.*, April, 1959, p. 7.

7 *Ibid.*, Dec, 1958, p. 7.

8 *Ibid.*, Aug., 1958, p. 10.

9 *Ibid.*, Feb., 1959, pp. 17, 18.

10 *Ibid.*, Dec, 1958, p. 7.

11 *Ibid.*, April, 1959, p. 7; Aug., 1959, p. 17.

12 *Ibid.*, May, 1959, p. 5.

13 *Ibid.*, Aug., 1959, p. 13.

14 *Ibid.*, May, 1959, p. 5.

15 *Ibid.*, Aug., 1959, p. 15.

17 *Ibid.*, p. 28.

18 *Ibid.*, p. 14.

19 *Review and Herald*, July 25, 1865, pp. 62, 63; Feb. 20, 1866, p. 89.

20 J. N. Loughborough, *Pacific Union Recorder*, Dec. 15, 1910. pp. 1, 2.

21 Report of *U.S. Census of Religious Bodies of the United States* for 1936, Bulletin 13, p. 32.

22, 23, 24, 25, 26 *The Plain Truth*, Aug., 1959, p. 16.

27, 28, 29 *Ibid* p. 28.

30 *Ibid.*, Nov., 1959, p. 8.

31, 32 *Ibid.*, Jan., 1960, pp. 9, 10.

33 *Ibid.*, Nov., 1959, pp. 9, 31.

34 *Ibid.*, p. 8; Dec, 1959, p. 10.

35 *Ibid.*, Dec, 1959, p. 7.

36, 37 *Ibid.*, p. 9; Jan., 1960, p. 9.

38 *Ibid.*, Dec, 1959, pp. 11, 31.

39 *Ibid.*, Jan., 1960, p. 9; Feb.. 1960, p. 9.

40 *Ibid.*, Jan., 1960, pp. 9, 10, 28-32; March, 1960, p. 11; April, 1960, p. 5.

41, 42, 43, 44 *Ibid.*, April, 1960, p. 5.

45 *Ibid.*, pp. 5-8, 12-15.

46 *Ibid.*, Nov., 1959, p. 8.

47 *U.S. Census of Religious Bodies of the United States* for 1936, Bulletin 66, pp. 24, 25; *The Plain Truth*, Sept. 1960 pp. 8, 16.

48 Letter to Robert L. Odom, dated March 8, 1953.

49 Letter to Robert L. Odom, dated March 11, 1953.

50 Letter to Robert L. Odom, dated October 10, 1954.

51 Letter to Robert L. Odom, dated March 1. 1960.

52 *The Plain Truth*, Sept. 1960 pp. 16, 17

53, 54 Ambassador College Bulletin (catalog) for 1958-60, p 15 (Pasadena California).

55 Letter to E. R. Walde, dated May 18, 1959.

56 *Ambassador College Bulletin*, p. 15.

57 *The Plain Truth*. July, 1953, p. 13.

58 *Ibid.*, April, 1959, p. 7.

59 *Ibid.*, Aug., 1959, p. 14.

60 *Ibid.*, July, 1953, p. 5.

61, 62 *Ibid.*, Aug., 1959, p. 14

63, 64 *Ibid.*, April, 1959, p. 7

65 *Ibid.*, Jan., 1960, p. 9