

Iron Sharpens Iron

Proverbs 27:17—As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another.



Who baptized Herbert Armstrong?

Why Mr. Armstrong was not rebaptized by the Church of God

By Ralph Orr

In the December 1978 *Plain Truth*, Herbert Armstrong told his readers who had baptized him. Because of his Quaker upbringing, Mr. Armstrong had not been baptized immediately after he had accepted Jesus Christ as his Savior. That is because Quakers do not practice that rite. Yet he was concerned enough to study the subject further.

"I went to four preachers for help, but relied solely on the Bible for the final decision," he wrote. "A Seventh-day Adventist preacher seemed coldly legalistic, lacking spiritual warmth. A Church of God (Seventh Day, Stanberry, Missouri) preacher didn't want to be bothered and was insulting.

"A Quaker minister was friendly, but had to admit finally, that he himself questioned his church's doctrine on this point and only went along with it because other 'holy men of God' (as he called them) in his church did. A Baptist minister had the best and clearest explanation, was warm and friendly and, I felt more spiritual in a sane and sensible way.

"So I asked him to baptize me, not into his church, but into Christ. For this I had to obtain permission from the rather august and dignified board of the church."

Who performed the baptism?

While Mr. Armstrong in that article did not name the man who baptized him, or the location of the baptism, the 1967 edition of his autobiography provides several clues.

In a section describing his investi-

Ralph Orr is a minister in the Editorial Department. A special thanks to evangelist Leroy Neff for taking the time to copy the letters from the Herbert W. Armstrong papers collection that were used in this article.

gation into baptism, Mr. Armstrong wrote: "I went to a Baptist minister in Portland [Oregon], to learn why Baptists believe in baptism. He was courteous and patient, glad to explain his church's teachings. He seemed sincere" (page 303).

As to the location of the baptism itself, the autobiography did not speak directly. Yet in a curiously worded section found only in the 1967 edition, Mr. Armstrong described his baptism in the context of a visit to Portland's Hinson Memorial Baptist Church.

"Mrs. Armstrong and I began to attend many different churches. I wanted to check on each—compare it with the Bible ... [I also] continued almost daily study at the Portland public library."

He continued: "It was probably May or June, 1927, when I was baptized. One Sunday evening we attended a service at the Hinson Memorial Baptist Church" (page 311).

It seems inexplicable that Mr. Armstrong would have mentioned his baptism in the context of this visit, unless he was baptized at about the same time in that church.

No other publicly available evidence is known to supply any additional insights into this subject. However, documents in the Herbert W. Armstrong private papers collection, stored in Pasadena, prove not only that the above conclusion is true, but provide additional insights into his relationship with the Baptists at Hinson Memorial.

The question of rebaptism

In a letter to A.N. Dugger, editor of *The Bible Advocate*, Mr. Armstrong explained why he chose to be baptized by a Sunday-observing Baptist preacher. Written about two years afterward, Mr. Armstrong had come under increasing pressure to be rebaptized.

"Last summer [1928] while Bro. Stith [an elder from Idaho] was here in Oregon, I began to notice among Church of God people at Dever [Oregon] an under-current of feeling against me because I was originally baptized by a first-day preacher, and

would not be baptized again by Bro. Stith," he wrote.

"Every possible pressure was brought to bear upon me to make me 'dissatisfied with my former baptism,' as it was put, and to be baptized all over again" (Herbert W. Armstrong to A.N. Dugger, May 8, 1929, Herbert W. Armstrong papers collection [HWAP, Worldwide Church of God, Pasadena, California], No. 2404, page 1)

In addition to Stith, another minister, elder Roy Dailey, also complained. A comparison of what Mr. Armstrong wrote in his autobiography with letters in the Herbert W. Armstrong papers collection suggests that Dailey wrote to A.N. Dugger to claim that Herbert Armstrong's failure to be baptized by a seventh-day minister was sufficient warrant to have Mr. Armstrong's articles withdrawn from *The Bible Advocate*.

Apparently in response to these concerns, G.A. Hobbs, a leading member in Oregon, wrote to Dugger in support of Mr. Armstrong's articles continuing.

In response to Hobbs, Dugger wrote: "I do not like the action of Brother Armstrong in going to a first-day Baptist minister to be baptized when he could have easily chosen one who was keeping all of God's commandments" (A.N. Dugger to G.A. Hobbs, Feb. 7, 1929, HWAP, No. 7619).

The correspondence between Hobbs and Dugger occurred during the time Mr. Armstrong was hoping his newly submitted manuscript, which later evolved into *The United States and Britain in Prophecy*, would be accepted by the Church of God (Seventh Day).

He was concerned that this difference over his baptism might prevent his paper from receiving a fair appraisal.

So he felt compelled to write the previously mentioned letter to Dugger, both to explain why he was baptized by a first-day Baptist and to urge that his paper be given a fair hearing.

In that letter, Mr. Armstrong related—See Mr. Armstrong, page 7

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Mr. Armstrong: 'Would you advise ... two baptisms?'

Continued from page 4

ed how he had counseled with ministers from four different denominations, including the Church of God elder who had treated him rudely. In addition to the rude treatment, this elder had pressured Mr. Armstrong to be baptized when Mr. Armstrong was still uncertain that baptism was necessary and unclear as to whether immersion was the proper method.

Mr. Armstrong would not be baptized until he was convinced both of its need and method. He confessed to Dugger that his Quaker background had instilled "an antipathy to all form, ceremony and ordinance—to regard it with prejudice and contempt."

Because the Church of God elder (M.W. Unzicker) lived in a distant state (Texas?), by the time Mr. Armstrong decided to be baptized no Church of God (Seventh Day) minister was immediately available.

But what about the Seventh-day Adventists? Could he not have been baptized by one of them?

"I did not feel that I agreed with these Adventists nearly as far as I did with the Baptist minister," Mr. Armstrong wrote. He commented that after he met several Seventh-day Adventist elders, he did not feel these were "true spiritual Christian men." His feelings about the Baptist pastor were quite different.

The Baptist pastor

"While I disagreed with the Baptist man on a number of points of doctrine, I did feel that he was a sincere spiritual Christian man" (Herbert Armstrong to A.N. Dugger, page 3).

Mr. Armstrong's respect for this minister went beyond mere recognition of his sincere spirituality.

"Now aside from doctrine, this Baptist minister appeared to be the most spiritual and the nearest to a sincere honest Christian of any I found in Portland.... Most of the things this Baptist minister is preaching in his pulpit are doing good rather than harm. It isn't my conception of what preaching ought to be, but it was the best in Portland.... The man himself came nearer being qualified to administer the ordinance of baptism than any at the time available" (Ibid., page 4).

In explaining his decision to Dugger, Mr. Armstrong emphasized that he "did not regard the minister as the important element in baptism." Being baptized was the baptismal candidate's act, not the minister's.

Nevertheless, he wanted a minister "whom God would regard as a duly ordained minister in his sight." Mr. Armstrong believed this Baptist preacher was just such a man.

The Sabbath question

Mr. Armstrong had another reason for choosing this man. Dwight Armstrong, Herbert's younger brother, had recently accepted Christ while attending a Quaker congregation in Salem, Oregon.

"While I had not yet had any opportunity to get the Sabbath truth before him, I did get the truth about baptism before him, and he was willing to go along with me and be baptized at the time" (Ibid., page 5).

Mr. Armstrong expressed concern that, had he made an issue of the Sabbath, his brother's prejudices against it might have hindered him from being baptized. "He had no prejudice against the Baptists, and was willing to go along with me there."

This raises the interesting fact that Mr. Armstrong did not feel it neces-

sary for a minister to teach converts about the Sabbath before baptizing them. He himself often baptized repentant individuals who had no belief in the Sabbath.

This was part of the controversy involving the July 1933 Firbutte campaign that led directly to the establishment of the Eugene church. Two other ministers, elders Oberg and Ray, sought to have Mr. Armstrong expelled from the Oregon Conference of the Church of God on the grounds that he did not teach his converts God's commandments before their baptism. This issue gets to the core of how the Worldwide Church of God began.

According to Mr. Armstrong, at a special Conference meeting, Oberg and Ray spoke for about two hours in the morning and two hours in the afternoon denouncing "my baptizing upon repentance and faith, before they had been given a complete education about God's Law" (*The Autobiography of Herbert W. Armstrong*, page 490 [pagination varies with edition]).

In his 15-minute defense, Mr. Armstrong argued that his converts were repentant, though they had only a rudimentary understanding of God's commandments.

Reasoning from Matthew 28, he said: "I baptized them after repentance and faith, just as the Bible instructs—and then, after laying on hands with prayer for their receiving of the Holy Spirit ... I taught them God's Commandments" (Ibid., page 491).

In the end, Oberg and Ray got the Conference to vote (in a rather controversial manner), that if Mr. Armstrong were to remain in the Conference, he had to baptize their way "instead of," as Mr. Armstrong put it, "the Scriptural way."

He wrote: "As soon as I heard of the action taken, I immediately wrote a letter canceling the \$3 per week salary, and suggesting they give it to Messrs. Oberg and Ray or else throw it in the Pacific Ocean! I did not resign from the Conference, nor was I put out. But I refused further salary" (Ibid., page 492).

Mr. Armstrong later felt that this decision to refuse the \$3 salary, so as to not compromise his determination to baptize those who had not yet been taught the Commandments, was the "crucial test," the turning point in his life. It was the defining moment that made possible the establishment of the Worldwide Church of God.

That he continued to baptize those who had no conviction on the Sabbath is evident from a typewritten paper he apparently composed in 1937, six years following his ordination.

"Shall the minister or evangelist cause the candidate to disobey the command to be baptized, following every scriptural example of doing it immediately, in order to first go into the Sabbath question which usually requires a great deal of time before it can be made clear, or permit them to obey the baptism command at once, then teaching them to observe the commandment?... Shall we cause disobedience to one command in order to gain obedience to the other?" (Herbert W. Armstrong, "When Does One Become a Fit Subject for Water Baptism?," *HWAP*, No. 8860, document 1, page 3).

Another paper written about that same time supports this conclusion. In it, Mr. Armstrong explained that there was no scriptural basis for instructing a repentant sinner about

"the Sabbath, pork and tobacco questions" before baptizing him. He understood the conditions for baptism to be quite simple: a repentant attitude and faith in Jesus.

He concluded by saying: "I feel I must baptize all who repent and accept Jesus in faith, at the very first opportunity, teaching doctrine afterward" (Herbert Armstrong, "Water Baptism: When Does One Become a Fit Subject for Baptism?," *HWAP*, No. 8860, document 3, page 3).

As we have seen, Mr. Armstrong believed that Sabbath observance did not inherently qualify a minister to baptize. He even believed some Sunday-observing ministers were better qualified than their seventh-day counterparts. He believed the same to be true of the baptismal candidates themselves. "A man can be truly repentant without being instructed in all that constitutes unrighteousness or sin."

So, following that reasoning, both Dwight and Herbert Armstrong were baptized together at the Hinson Memorial Baptist Church in Portland, Oregon.

Defending himself, Mr. Armstrong responded to the suggestion that he needed to be rebaptized.

"Would you advise me to indulge in two baptisms, when our Bible says one baptism? Would you advise me to be buried with Christ unto death a second time?"

"If I, then and there, presented my body a living sacrifice, burying self, and the old self is already dead and buried, how would you advise me to go about burying again a thing that is already dead and buried?... And if I am already risen with Christ unto newness of life, and am trying as far as I am able to live the new life for Him, can I be so risen a second time without going back to the former state?" (Armstrong to Dugger, page 6).

In August 1928, six months before this correspondence with Dugger, Mr. Armstrong wrote to his parents and grandparents about their need for baptism. His in-laws and grandparents were coming to Portland to be baptized and he wanted his parents to join them.

Dr. Dean

In his letter to his parents we learn that the pastor at Hinson Memorial was Dr. Dean. He assures his parents that the baptismal tank at Hinson is

"almost secluded from the congregation, except those in the balcony," and that the water was warm.

"Dr. Dean, the preacher, is a very spiritual man, and an earnest fundamental Christian, who believes as you do on all important questions. I believe it [Hinson Memorial] is the nicest place you could go" (Armstrong to "Mother and Dad," Aug. 30, 1928, *HWAP*, No. 859, page 1).

To his grandparents (whom he called "Dear Folks"), his Uncle Walt and other relatives he wrote: "If you do not honestly feel sure in your own mind that God wants you to rest and keep holy the time between Friday and Saturday sunsets, it is not disobedience not to do it.... I now realize it has nothing to do with salvation.... Until you had taken that step [of baptism] I have felt you should not be bothered with the Sabbath question" (Armstrong to "Dear Folks," Aug. 30, 1928, *HWAP*, No. 892, page 12).

Having discussed these issues, Mr. Armstrong then encouraged his family to arrive early Sunday morning so that they could attend the morning services at Hinson Memorial.

"It would be better for all of you to see the church and hear Dr. Dean and see and know who is to baptize you in the evening.... You'll like the church, their facilities for baptism, and the preacher, I am sure" (Ibid.).

Mr. Armstrong prodded his parents to be baptized upon their repentance of sin and their faith in Christ. Speaking of his own, earlier baptism, he later wrote: "And so I was baptized forthwith and without delay. Immediately upon coming up out of the water, a change was experienced in attitude and in mind generally.... For the first time, I felt clean! I knew, now, that the terribly heavy load of sin had been taken off my shoulders. Christ had paid the penalty for me. All past sins were now blotted out by his blood."

"My conscience was clean and clear. For the first time in my life I experienced real inner peace of mind!... There was a quiet, wonderful happiness of mind in the sure knowledge that now I was actually a begotten son of God! I could really call God Father!" (*The Autobiography of Herbert W. Armstrong*, pages 307-308).

It was this experience, this sure knowledge, this reality, that he so dearly wanted to share with them.

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