

The Importance of Church of God History

In the famous movie, *The Sound of Music*, is the memorable scene when the Von Trapp family was escaping from their home under cover of darkness. Captain Von Trapp had an "invitation" to serve in the navy of the Third Reich, and was attempting to flee to Switzerland to avoid participating in the Nazi war machine. However, the Nazi Gauleiter caught him under his spotlight. He told Von Trapp: "I've not asked you where you and your family are going. Nor have you asked me why I'm here." Captain Von Trapp replied, "Well apparently, we are both suffering from a deplorable lack of curiosity."

Many people in the Church of God today are like that. They have a remarkable lack of curiosity about their history, even the recent history of their Church. Vital lessons are there to be learned, but they have no interest. Like evolutionists who "willingly are ignorant" of the geological proofs of the flood, **II Peter 3:5**, these brethren choose not to be aware of the facts of the history of Sabbath-keepers. Church of God history is important for us today.

Recently, I met an old friend in the Church I had not seen in twenty years. He did not agree with me when I left the Worldwide Church of God in 1975 over the massive doctrinal changes of 1974. Yet in 1995, he left Worldwide, and now attends the United Church of God. "I understand what you went through, Richard," he now relates. He was sitting in services one Sabbath, listening to the message in support of the Trinity doctrine, and asked himself, "What am I doing here? I don't believe what they are saying." I rejoice that my friend has taken a personal stand for Truth.

My friend noted the changes in the Worldwide Church of God. He said he wouldn't be surprised if they changed their teaching relative to the time of the Messiah's resurrection, from Sabbath to Sunday. When I told him that the Church changed its views on the time of the resurrection some twenty years ago, he looked incredulous. Yet the evidence is plain that the Worldwide Church of God changed their teaching on the resurrection of the Saviour as early as 1974. Few know this, because of lack of attention to historical details. Full well did our Master predict that His Church would be spiritually asleep, **Matthew 25:5**. I will briefly digress to demonstrate this little-known fact of history.

Messiah Resurrected on Sabbath or First Day?

In the summer of 1927, shortly after his baptism, Herbert Armstrong learned the "shocking truth" that the resurrection of Christ did not occur on Sunday. Instead, he discovered from the Bible that "The resurrection was late Sabbath afternoon, just prior to sunset" (*Autobiography of Herbert W. Armstrong*, page 326, 1967 edition).

But, in 1974, the Worldwide Church of God used a Sunday resurrection as a major proof that Pentecost is on Sunday. Pages 42-43 of *Pentecost Study Material* state:

If He [Christ] was 'seen of them 40 days' and if He was seen of them on SUNDAY, first (day) of the week, then Luke's '50th day' (Greek *Pentecostes*) seems to mean *50 days after His resurrection, or 50 days after His first ascension*

to be accepted of the Father. Then that 50th day has to be SUNDAY! . . . Luke's Pentecost was literally the fiftieth day since Christ's resurrection!

Did you see it? The resurrection of Christ and his ascension to Heaven are held to be on the same day of the week, *Sunday*! On page 75, the paper cites a number of religious encyclopedias to demonstrate a Sunday Pentecost tradition:

Whitsunday, OR PENTECOST, a feast of the universal Church which commemorates the Descent of the Holy Ghost upon the Apostles, fifty days after the Resurrection of Christ, on the ancient Jewish festival called the 'feast of weeks' or Pentecost *Catholic Encyclopedia*, 1911 ed., Vol. XV, 'Whitsunday.'

Most people in the Worldwide Church of God, like myself, did not see in 1974 that the Church had changed its teaching relative to the day of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Yet in 1974, the Church had changed its teaching from a Sabbath resurrection to a First Day resurrection.

Dr. Herman L. Hoeh, in a June 9, 1978, Bible Study in Pasadena, said, "We might as well face it, — that the resurrection occurred minutes following the close of the Sabbath — Saturday night, when the wavesheaf was [supposedly] cut."

Richard Ames, on the *World Tomorrow* television program of April 15, 1990, said, "That Saturday evening, just after sunset, then, Jesus rose from the tomb . . ." The program was broadcast more than once.

Most current and former members of the Worldwide Church of God do not know that their Church teaches that Jesus rose on the first day of the week!

In the March, 1996 issue of *The Good News*, published by the United Church of God, Wilbur Berg, in an article entitled, "Does Easter Sunday Commemorate Jesus' Resurrection?" states, "Jesus rose around sunset, three days and three nights (72 hours) after burial, fulfilling the sign of Jonah." While Herbert Armstrong was sure, from Bible evidence, that the resurrection of the Messiah was before sunset on the Sabbath, Mr. Berg is not sure exactly on which day of the week the resurrection of Christ was! If you are unsure of the timing of the resurrection of our Savior, please read the excellent article by Herbert W. Armstrong, "Does Easter Really Commemorate the Resurrection?" in our book, **Early Writings of Herbert W. Armstrong**, available from Giving & Sharing, PO Box 100, Neck City, MO 64849 (suggested donation, \$9.00).

Garbled Record of History

Perhaps the most difficult pill to swallow is the fact that Church leaders sometimes distort Church history. A classic example of how history can become garbled is given in a July 3, 1995, "Dear Friend and Subscriber" letter from Garner Ted Armstrong.

He relates the miraculous healing in 1927 of his mother, Loma Armstrong, from a life-threatening case of lock-jaw, blood poisoning and quinsy. Garner Ted says that her neighbor lady, Mrs. Ora Runcorn, believed in divine healing, and had her minister pray for Mrs. Armstrong. "It was this healing," GTA states, "which led my mother to ask Mrs. Runcorn, 'WHY do you people keep Saturday for Sunday?'" As a result of Mrs. Runcorn's Bible study with Loma Armstrong, she accepted the Sabbath. And, you and I today believe in the Sabbath as result of Mrs. Runcorn's Bible Study with Loma Armstrong, and the calling of the Almighty on each one of us individually.

Now, Ora Runcorn did exist. She did help Loma Armstrong accept the Bible Sabbath. However, she was not Herbert and Loma's neighbor. Her (Church of God Seventh Day) minister was not the one who prayed for Loma's healing. In fact, the Armstrongs were living in Portland. The Runcorn's were the next door neighbors of Herbert Armstrong's parents, who lived not in Portland, but Salem! The minister who prayed for Loma Armstrong was not a Sabbath-keeper, but a Pentecostal minister. (For proof, see pages 6-18 of *The Origin and History of the Church of God, International*, and pages 290-298 of *The Autobiography of Herbert W. Armstrong*, Volume I, 1973 edition.)

It is this sloppy, lack of concern for accurate details, that makes deciphering actual church history a daunting task!

The Use and Abuse of History

Some people say that I am an authority on recent Church of God history. I have written several books on the history of Sabbath-keepers covering the past couple of hundred years. However, little do others know of the struggles I have had in ferreting out these rudimentary historical sketches. There is far more that I *don't know* about church history than what I *do know*! At times, I have even had to personally wrestle with the urge to cover up unsettling historical facts that I had discovered.

It took myself and others more than a year to prepare for publication our book, **Early Writings of Herbert W. Armstrong**. The pains that we took to be accurate were immense. When I thought we were ready for publication, I ruefully determined that I had been duped on one of the major articles. I had initially planned to use the edition of *The United States in Prophecy* published by the Philadelphia Church of God, which I *assumed* was the 1945 edition. "Every effort," Gerald Flurry wrote in his introduction, "has been made to preserve this work in its original [1945 edition] form." The only exceptions he admitted were to update outdated statistics and references to King George, replacing them with current statistics and Queen Elizabeth. This is not true. There are hundreds of changes Flurry made to the 1945 edition, many of which have nothing to do with "outdated statistics." At best, his version is only 80-90% the same as the original, public domain, 1945, 24-page edition. Lest I forget to point the finger back at myself, I would never had caught this error had not a friend sent me a copy of the original 1945 edition. You know what happens when you assume!

Then, I faced a unpleasant discovery: *Herbert Armstrong was a trinitarian in his early years!* It appears that his trinitarian beliefs continued into the early 1940s, in spite of the fact that the

Church of God (Seventh Day) that he worked with during his early years were anti-trinitarians, and some were Arians. I developed more than one cold sweat deciding what to do with this information. "If I publish this discovery, perhaps it will be used by some to support their current Trinitarian concepts," I thought. After much prayer and soul-searching, I decided that I would let the chips fall where they may. After all, I might not like the Truth, but I would be guilty of a cover up if I did not relate the whole Truth, and nothing but the Truth.

Later, I wrote to John Ogwyn of the Global Church of God. He has written a fine summary of Church history, *God's Church Through the Ages*. I was disturbed by his statement on page 67, "The Church of God has, throughout its history, been non-Trinitarian." Mr. Ogwyn's reply was profound: "I was unaware that Mr. Armstrong had ever held trinitarian views and can't give a definitive answer as to why he did so in light of the historic Church of God teaching. However, I know that Mr. Armstrong was not one to easily take someone else's word for something, so I can see him as 'the odd man out' with COG7 ministers until he was convinced and could see it for himself from the Bible. The fact that he at one time espoused the trinity and subsequently rejected it and taught against it, gives lie to the statement from Pasadena that he never really studied the subject. It seems to me that Mr. Armstrong's teaching, since at least the early 1950s, on the nature of God was one of his greatest contributions to the Church" (personal letter, Feb. 11, 1996).

If a leading minister such as John Ogwyn did not know that Herbert Armstrong was a trinitarian for years after he began his ministry, it is not surprising why historical ignorance is so rampant.

Sabbath-Keepers Flunk History

Many Sabbath-keepers today would fail a test on their own history. Seventh Day Adventists, do you know that your Church's great leaders of the nineteenth century were anti-Trinitarian, and that the homosexual movement has gained ground among you? Seventh Day Baptists, do you know that your leaders of the nineteenth century eschewed Christmas and the Trinity? And, closer to home, Church of God (Seventh Day) members, do you know that Sunday-keepers have taken over some of your churches, that there is a pro-trinitarian movement gaining ground among you?

And as for those in or out of the Worldwide Church of God, do you know what your Church teaches, and why? Do you know the sordid facts of leading ministers who have been convicted of libel and slander (costing the church many hundreds of thousands of dollars), arrested for drunk driving, caught in sexual misconduct, divorced and remarried (contrary to the qualifications for a minister in **I Timothy 3:2**)? Many do not know these recent historical facts because they choose to be ignorant of them. Knowledge of facts sometimes causes us to take unpleasant actions.

Knowing, and understanding, the lessons of the history of the Church of God, is a choice. You can choose to uncover historical facts, and learn from them, or you can forget about them, and reap the awful consequences. In 1971, when I was researching the history of the Church of God (Seventh Day), I met and interviewed E.A. Straub, a very impressive leader of the Denver Group, who was responsible for the 1949 merger of the Salem and Stanberry factions of the

Church of God. I asked him many point blank questions about the history of the splits and divisions in the Church of God, and Herbert W. Armstrong's early years. He gave me straight answers, so much so that his wife became irritated. She asked him to stop telling me these unsettling facts. He retorted to her that I had asked honest questions, and he felt I deserved honest answers. May there be more people like him!

Forgive Us Our Trespasses?

Joseph Tkach, in his personal in the March/April, 1996 *The Plain Truth*, indicates that he has a profound interest in the history of the Worldwide Church of God. For him, he wants to preserve the history which proves his points that the Church had flawed doctrines, was judgmental and self-righteous, imposed on its members a works-oriented approach to Christian living, requiring adherence to "burdensome regulations of Old Testament code." He says, "We are looking our history squarely in the face and confronting the faults and sins we find. They will always remain a part of our history, serving as a perpetual reminder of the dangers of legalism."

Tkach does have a motive for "preserving" history: to support his current doctrinal positions. Now, I would be foolish to say that I do not also have an historical bias, in spite of my enormous efforts to present an historical account, "warts and all."

However, there is a difference between myself and Joseph Tkach. I know from the Bible (especially the books of Judges, Samuel, Kings and Chronicles), that the overall lesson of the history of God's people is "revelation to apostasy." At times, Truth is revealed (re-discovered), and for a time, God's people live by it. They are strong, and do exploits. These periods of renewal are followed by apostasy, when many give up the Truth, water it down, and/or let it slack. These periods in ancient Israel often lasted for about 40 years. For forty years they were up, then for forty years they were down, continually repeating this sorry cycle. The Bible and the fruits prove that Joseph Tkach has led a down cycle in the Church of God.

Recently, Mr. Tkach wrote to me, asking for my input to his chart showing the "Roots of the Worldwide Church of God." He said he has enjoyed reading my books on "our common church history." What did he mean, "our"? The exploits of Church of God ministers over the last 150 years have not been done by those who took the easy route of watering down the Truth of God. Not a one of them believed that Christ fulfilled the Law, so we don't have to keep it. None of them believed that the observance of the seventh day Sabbath is not required of New Covenant Christians. Of course, there were, and still are, some differences of belief in the Church of God. However, the beliefs of the Worldwide Church of God today are totally at variance with the historical Sabbatarian Church of God.

We have indeed a rich historical heritage. Historical accounts of early Sabbath-keeping Waldenses inspire me, while later Waldenses who gave up their historical beliefs at Chanforan in the sixteenth century serve to illustrate the human tendency to degenerate and apostatize. Yes, I pray that the Eternal will forgive us our trespasses in departing from the Truth of the Living God, and bring us back into His fold.