

TIME MAGAZINE

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Garner Ted Armstrong, Where Are You?

Posted Monday, May 15, 1972

Until last fall, lean, gray-templed Garner Ted Armstrong was the quintessential religious soft-sell artist. His program called *The World Tomorrow* was carried on some 400 radio and 99 TV stations. His slick, free monthly called *The Plain Truth* went to 2,100,000 subscribers. To the millions of Americans who followed him, Garner Ted dispensed glib solutions to such problems as drugs, crime, broken marriages and delinquent children—all implicitly in the name of the Worldwide Church of God. This is a stern, bizarre sect founded in 1934 as the Radio Church of God by Garner Ted's father Herbert W. Armstrong, a Quaker-born ad salesman turned preacher, and still ruled by the elder Armstrong from headquarters in Pasadena, Calif. Garner Ted, 42, was the heir apparent not only to the W.C.G. but also to a church-run institution called Ambassador College: three campuses (in Pasadena; Big Sandy, Texas; and St. Albans, England) where the buildings are expensive and the tuition cheap, the boys' sideburns high and the girls' skirts low.

Then, last October, Garner Ted was suddenly relieved of duties as executive vice president of the church and vice chancellor of Ambassador College. Later his name was expunged from the masthead of *The Plain Truth*. His radio programs were replaced by ten-year-old tapes made by his father.

Bonds of Satan. At first, Herbert told W.C.G. members that Garner Ted was simply taking a long overdue leave of absence. Then, in February, the inner church membership—about 75,000 people—heard a letter from Pasadena so secret that their ministers were ordered to burn it after reading. Its message: Garner Ted was "in the bonds of Satan." At the end of April, the senior Armstrong made a more public statement to the broader church membership—the "coworker" category, which includes such sympathizers as Chess Grandmaster Bobby Fischer—explaining that Garner Ted had confessed to some kind of transgression against "God, against his church and his apostle, against the wife God gave me in my youth, against all my closest friends."

What sort of transgression? *TIME* Correspondent Sandra Burton posed the question to Herbert Armstrong in a rare interview last week. "Look up I Timothy, Chapter 3, first five or six verses," replied Armstrong, "and Titus, Chapter 1, verse 6." Both passages make two points in common: that a bishop or church elder must be faithful to his wife and rule strictly over believing children. Had handsome Garner Ted succumbed to an old and common temptation? His father was cryptic: "The fault was spiritual, not moral."

In the heterodox, rigidly disciplined Christianity of the Worldwide Church of God, that could mean anything. In Herbert Armstrong's theology, unknown to much of his public, the British and the Americans are among the ten lost Hebrew tribes, destined to fight—and succumb to—a renewed Holy Roman Empire probably led by Germany. Then a Chinese-Russian alliance will fight the battle of Armageddon with the victor. At first, Herbert Armstrong

predicted the beginning of the end for the late 1930s. The most recent Apocalypse was due on Jan. 7, 1972.

In other departures from traditional Christianity, Armstrong and his faithful worship on Saturday, not Sunday; they observe kosher laws set forth in the Old Testament. They celebrate Passover but not Christmas or Easter. They deny the Trinity. But they believe steadfastly in the tithe—so much so that each member is expected to set aside three tithes, or tenths, of his gross income. One-tenth is for church headquarters. One-tenth is for the member's travel expenses to church festivals. And, every few years, yet another tenth is required for "widows and orphans." The church monitors the tithes by computer; one member caught cheating was sentenced to tithe double for the rest of his life.

Royal Style. Small wonder that the church's annual income is estimated at around \$55 million. Or that Founder Armstrong zips round the world to visit such leaders as Japan's Prime Minister Eisaku Sato or India's Indira Gandhi in a Grumman Gulfstream jet that gobbles up at least \$1.5 million a year. Former W.C.G. members charge that the Armstrongs live like kings while members often live in poverty in order to pay their tithes. They maintain that each of the two Armstrongs has elegant homes in Texas, California and England; that Herbert sports a \$1,000 watch and bought a \$2,000 set of cuff links and tie tack for a Jerusalem trip.

But far worse, others say, is the havoc wreaked on families by Armstrong's unyielding doctrines. One of those doctrines forbids members to undergo any medical treatment. According to ex-Elder John Judy of Akron, a 40-year-old Ohio woman with a history of heart disease died a few months after her minister put her on a diet consisting only of grape juice; the minister did not object when she substituted grape soda. Mrs. Henry W. Peterson of Seattle relates that the W.C.G. broke up her second marriage, of 24 years' standing, because it does not recognize civil divorce. Severe punishment of children is taken as a sign of loyalty to the church, says Judy, who recalls seeing one father spanking his child at a church meeting as if he were "whipping a horse."

If such charges are true, Garner Ted Armstrong might have had any number of reasons to disagree with his father. Indeed, reports one insider, much of the trouble may stem from three sermons Garner Ted gave at Big Sandy, Texas. In one, he wondered aloud why church members did not experience more healings. In another, he emphasized the Apostle Paul—a nearly forgotten man in W.C.G. theology because he talked of a New Covenant replacing the old. During a third, Garner Ted questioned whether the church had the proper presence of the Holy Spirit.

Whatever the cause of Garner Ted's disappearance, his father smilingly insisted last week that the errant lad was in Colorado, making the best of his exile. If so, he was not at a favorite retreat on a former sheep ranch near Oak Creek. When Correspondent Burton trekked out to the ranch, she found it deserted, with its electric meter padlocked. It had not been used all winter.