**Armstrong’s Church of God: Mellowed Aberrations?**

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S*econd of Two Parts*

During my nine-day visit to the headquarters of the Worldwide Church of God last spring, I asked about doctrinal changes during recent years. Robert Kuhn, the administrative assistant to Garner Ted Armstrong, outlined them for me, stressing that the altered beliefs make up only a small part of the church’s doctrinal corpus.

*1. The “spirit” in man.* Herbert W. Armstrong (HWA) had previously taught that man’s nature is essentially no different from that of animals. But a dozen years ago he gained the insight that human beings have a capacity for spiritual communion, noble aspiration, moral sensitivity, and creativity that distinguishes them from other creatures. The “spirit in man” concept is midway between the mechanistic view of human nature and the traditional Christian belief that man has an “immortal soul” that survives physical death. The latter belief is denied in the WCG. Man’s spirit is considered a sort of blueprint or tape recording of his spiritual essence that, upon death, is filed away in a heavenly storage vault until its resurrection.

*2. The hundred years.* According to Armstrong doctrine, there will be three resurrections: that of the faithful, upon Christ’s return, who will rule with him during his millennial reign upon the earth; that of the ignorant, at the conclusion of the millennium, for a bona fide first chance to hear and respond to the Gospel; and that of incorrigible sinners, at the expiration of the grace period, for consignment to the lake of fire. Basing his conclusion on Isaiah 65:20*b*, “for the child shall die a hundred years old, and the sinner a hundred years old shall be accursed,” HWA previously taught that the interval between the second and third resurrections would be a hundred years. But in 1969 Kuhn suggested to him that the use of this Scripture in support of the hundred-year hypothesis was unwarranted. Armstrong agreed, and this aspect of the probationary doctrine was dropped.

*3. Nineteen-year time cycles.* In keeping with his almost superstitious fascination with numbers, HWA used to be fond of drawing numerological parallels between the apostolic church and his own organization. Just as nineteen years passed between the Great Day of Pentecost and the penetration of Europe with the Gospel in A.D. 50, so nineteen years passed between the launching of the Armstrong “Work” in 1934 and the Armstrong gospel’s “leap” of the Atlantic in 1953, when “The World Tomorrow” was broadcast to Europe via Radio Luxembourg. A second nineteen-year period ended with the destruction of Jerusalem and the flight of the remnant church to Pella in A.D. 69. Although he backed off from setting dates, especially toward the close of the cycle, HWA gave his followers the distinct impression that the “one true church” would be raptured to Petra, in the Jordanian wilderness south of the Dead Sea, and that the dreaded tribulation would commence on the thirty-eighth anniversary of his first regular broadcast, i.e., on January 7, 1972. But as the deadline approached and the endtime events did not materialize, Armstrong withdrew from circulation his booklet *1975 in Prophecy* (which predicted Christ’s return in 1975, midway through the seven-year tribulation period), and the doctrines of 1972, Petra, and the nineteen-year time cycles went down the drain.

*4. Church eras.* Herbert W. Armstrong has long believed that the letters to the seven churches in Revelation 1–3 parallel the seven phases of Christian history. He taught that his church—the Worldwide Church of God—was the church of the Philadelphia era, the sixth of the seven. This was the church before which the Lord set an “open door” (presumably for proclaiming to the world the gospel according to Armstrong, via the air waves and the printed page). It was the one that would be spared the tribulation because of its “patient endurance.” But as signs of the times failed to develop, the doctrine of church eras was deemphasized.

*5. The Jewish Temple.* Another aspect of endtime prophecy that has been played down in recent years is the restoration of the Jewish Temple on Mount Moriah in Jerusalem as a precondition of Christ’s second coming. The de-emphasis began after Denis Rohan, an Australian shepherd and Armstrong co-worker, was arrested for attempted arson at the El Aqsa Mosque on the Temple Mount in August, 1969. When arrested, Rohan was carrying a copy of *the Plain Truth* featuring an illustrated article in which HWA declared that “all that accumulated debris of century after century must be cleared off before that event [Christ’s return] can occur.” Robert Kuhn admitted that the church soft-pedaled the teaching following the Rohan incident. But still “it is their strong educated guess—based on Revelation 11, Daniel, etc.”—that the Temple *will* be rebuilt.

*6. The Roman Catholic Church.* Also deemphasized has been the identification of the Roman Catholic Church as “Babylon,” the “whore” of Revelation, and the “Synagogue of Satan,” and of Protestant denominations as “Satan’s counterfeits.” Asked to react, Kuhn commented, “I think the church has matured in its approach. It came to realize that these doctrines offended outsiders—so the approach has been softened.”

*7. Openness.* In January, 1973, Garner Ted Armstrong (GTA) announced a new policy of “openness.” Outsiders would be admitted to worship services; church meetings would be advertised in newspapers (this was already being done in Canada); ministers’ telephone numbers no longer would be unlisted. Interested non-members may now attend the Feast of Tabernacles.

*8. Pentecost.* For years the WCG had observed Pentecost on Monday—and for years a handful of scholars in the church argued that the proper day was Sunday. Finally officials authorized a thorough study of the issue, soliciting the expert opinions of a number of leading theologians (including Harold Lindsell, the editor of CHRISTIANITY TODAY). At issue was Leviticus 23:15 and 16, and whether in reckoning the fiftieth day after Passover the first day should be Saturday (Pentecost would then fall on a Sunday) or Sunday (with Pentecost then on a Monday). The scholars agreed—and HWA accepted their verdict in 1974—that “counting fifty days to the morrow after the seventh sabbath” (Lev. 23:16) indicated Sunday as the correct day.

*9. Divorce and remarriage.* Throughout WCG history no policy has occasioned more grief and bitterness than that requiring members to dissolve post-divorce marriage unions, branded by the church as adulterous regardlesss of the circumstances. Over the years hundreds of marriages were terminated and families broken up because of the ruling. At the May, 1974, ministerial conference, the announcement that the rule had been rescinded was greeted with tumultuous applause. Two years later, at the 1976 conference, a definite statement on the subject was issued. It affirmed, “The Church accepts new converts in whatever marital state they enter the church.… A previously divorced person who has entered fellowship is free to remarry within the Church.…” Three scriptural bases for divorce that would permit remarriage were cited: fraud, *porneia*, and desertion. The remarriage should take place within the church.

*10. Marriages between believers and non-believers.* This problem, according to a statement issued to the ministry last year, “has recently been highlighted in black Africa, where God is calling many young black men and few, if any, young black women.” But although greater freedom has been granted, marriage is not to be entered into lightly, and Paul’s counsel not to be “unequally yoked together with unbelievers” should be followed whenever possible.

*11. First tithe.* The WCG depends upon contributions from tithe-paying members for three-fourths of its operating income. Until 1975, first tithe was based on *gross* income. But last year the requirement was relaxed to permit a base of *net* income instead. (However, the church’s 1977 “Tithe Deduction Authorization” for employees reads: “I authorize Worldwide Church of God to deduct \_\_\_*%* of my gross pay.…”) In an earlier modification, “splitting tithable income to preserve a marriage with an unconverted mate” permitted the WCG member in a divided household to contribute 5 per cent instead of the usual 10.

*12. Second tithe.* HWA used to teach that failure to set aside a second 10 per cent of one’s income to finance attendance at the annual Feast of Tabernacles was “robbing God.” But in a 1976 letter to members, GTA declared that the person who neglects the second tithe was robbing himself, not God.

*13. Third tithe.* Every 3 1/2 years members are expected to submit a third tithe for “widows and orphans.” The multiple tithes, plus special offerings, imposed an unbearable burden upon low-income families. According to Kuhn, the principle “not *from* the poor but *for* the poor” has always been the rule, though it has not been consistently applied by ministers at the local level. Hence he regards the 1974 ruling to relax the third-tithe requirement for those unable to afford it as a clarification rather than a change.

*14. Healing.* Previous Armstrong doctrine permitted “repair” surgery (such as setting broken bones, and suturing wounds,) as well as such mild forms of medication as aspirin for headaches and pain-killing drugs for dental work. But other medical services were proscribed. A 1959 *Good News* article said that God denounces medical science as “sorcery,” “witchcraft,” and “idolatry.” Nevertheless, Ambassador College has retained the services of a physician through the years—to take care of emergency illnesses and injuries and to provide treatment for those lacking the faith to rely solely on God for their healing. The policy has not been applied uniformly. Roderick Meredith, onetime administrative director of the WCG, submitted to eye surgery; but his wife, refusing recommended medical treatment, died of cancer in 1976 at the age of forty. Former WCG executive Al Carrozzo alleges that HWA secretly arranged a prostate operation in a Los Angeles area hospital, then emphatically denied the rumor that he had had a prostate operation *in Mexico.* Kuhn denied that the eighty-four-year-old Armstrong had had prostate surgery in California, Mexico, or anywhere else. No position of the church, with the exception of “D & R” (divorce and remarriage), has occasioned more adverse criticism. Then a year ago GTA told his radio audience that any person withholding emergency medical services should be jailed. And at the May, 1976, ministerial conference, WCG authorities conceded, “If one seeks help and advice from trained physicians, this is not at all inconsistent with God’s concern for physical life. Neither does this show a lack of faith nor prevent God from performing a miracle.”

*15. Race.* In the early history of the church, blacks were admitted to membership but with second-class status. At first they were refused admission to Ambassador College. Then blacks were permitted to enter if they were married—to guard against mixed dating and the “sin” of intermarriage. In the late sixties, single blacks were enrolled, and today blacks make up about 6 per Cent of the Pasadena student body (45 of its 800 students). In my visit to the campus last year I noted that seven of the forty-two singers in the excellent choir that performed for the Sabbath services were black. A decade ago the first black minister was assigned to a racially mixed congregation in Detroit. A few years later other black ministers were awarded leadership positions. In a ten-page statement issued to the 1976 ministerial conference, an outright renunciation of HWA’s earlier theology was declared: “In the Kingdom of God there will be no racial stigma of any kind. The Church of God should reflect the coming Kingdom of God in its attitudes toward race at the present time.” It continued, “We cannot and do not forbid people of different racial or ethnic backgrounds to marry even though such marriages may not be wise.”

*16. British-Israel identity.* The identification of the tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh with England and the United States, heralded by HWA as “*the key*” to interpreting the bulk of Bible prophecy relating to the endtime, has been deemphasized but not repudiated. Acceptance used to be made a condition of church membership by some ministers, but it is no longer a mandatory belief. A revised version of the church’s most asked for booklet, “The U.S. and British Commonwealth in Prophecy,” was issued in 1974 to eliminate some of the weaker “proofs” as “being speculative at best”—and to generalize the timetable of future events. (The older edition had pointed to 1975 or thereabouts as the year of Christ’s return.) In a 1973 interview, GTA told me the doctrine is not essential to salvation and can’t be proved; nevertheless, he continues to promulgate it on the broadcast. The elder Armstrong tactfully refrains from mentioning the teaching in his peace-seeking missions to world capitals.

*17. The Sabbath.* A more relaxed approach to the Sabbath has replaced the legalism of former years. The new philosophy, which stresses that “the Sabbath was made for man and not man for the Sabbath” (Mark 2:28), is embodied in a paper distributed at the 1976 ministerial conference. The statement points out that “it is not the responsibility of the Church to create a Talmud of do’s and don’ts for Sabbath observance. The Church teaches the *broad principles* and the members apply them in situations as they arise.”

*18. Women.* When Ambassador College in Pasadena opened its doors in 1947, half of the original faculty of eight were women. But after the first year, HWA decided to hire only men, except for such courses as music and home economics. The current catalogue lists 19 women on the Pasadena faculty of 102.

*19. Makeup.* Formerly considered sinful, the wearing of makeup was declared a non-issue in 1974.

*20. Clothing and hair style.* Previously, strict guidelines were imposed. But now, as in the case of makeup, rules have been abolished in favor of the guiding principle of “modesty and decorum.”

*21. Music.* Until recently, “rock” music was forbidden in Ambassador dormitories. Now more latitude is given. Concerts and dances geared to young people are permitted to present music in the modern idiom.

*22. Dating.* A few years ago, Ambassador students were limited to one date per semester with the same person for the first two years of college. For the next year and a half, three dates per person were permitted, and in the final semester there were no restrictions. These rigid controls have been lifted, in keeping with GTA’s belief that character is more effectively developed internally than by external rules.

*23. Birthdays.* Observance of birthdays, formerly considered a sin, was declared by GTA in 1975 to be no longer a moral issue.

*24. Civil government.* Voting, non-combatant military service, and involvement in politics (at least on the local level) have gained acceptance through a process of evolution. Voting, although neither approved nor encouraged, was removed from the “sin” category in 1976. At one time the WCG instructed its young men to register as conscientious objectors and to refrain from participating in war and in all other aspects of “corrupt human government.” But the posture has been softened, and today WCG members may enter non-combatant military service without censure. The breakthrough into local politics came when WCG member Steve Prociw was named mayor of Big Sandy, Texas, in 1971.

*25. Child rearing.* Harsh discipline of children—even tiny babies—has long been a criticized aspect of WCG doctrine. Robert Kuhn explained that some over-zealous parents have carried corporal punishment to unreasonable extremes and that cautionary measures have been taken to prevent future excesses.

*26. Land sabbath.* In earlier years WCG farmers were required to observe the Levitical requirement to let their fields lie fallow every seventh year. A few years ago this requirement was lifted.

*27. Community outreach.* For decades, WCG congregations were virtual islands, isolated from the sea of worldliness that surrounded them. But today, not only are “outsiders” welcomed at church meetings, but members are organizing outreach ministries to their communities. The Appleton, Wisconsin, church has opened the Christian Clothes Closet to provide free used clothing for the needy. A recycling project is under way in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, under the auspices of the WCG congregation. And in Pasadena. Ambassador College is offering continuing-education courses (in business, music, speech, religion, crafts—and even bridge, dancing, and rock climbing) to anyone interested.

*28. Gambling.* In view of reports that GTA has occasionally been seen at the gaming tables in a club at Lake Tahoe, I asked Robert Kuhn if the church frowned on gambling. He replied that the WCG has never announced a policy on the subject. (However, 1960 and 1969 articles in the *Plain Truth* condemn gambling as “a violation of the eighth commandment … a blatant *denial* of the teachings of Christ,” a “terrible CURSE.”)

*29. Adoption.* WCG members used to be forbidden to adopt children. That rule is no longer in force.

These, then, are areas where WCG doctrines have been modified. Yet the changes have left basic WCG tenets intact. A partial list: the self-image of the WCG as the “one true church” and of HWA as Christ’s only true apostle to the world since the first century; the rejection of hell, and the corollary teaching that the wicked will be annihilated; insistence upon the seventh-day sabbath as the only divinely approved day of rest and worship; the teaching that Mosaic dietary laws are binding upon Christians today; the teaching that only immersion baptism by a WCG minister is valid; the view that law-keeping is a condition of salvation.

**The WCG sees itself as the “one true church,” rejects hell and damnation, and holds that law-keeping is a condition of salvation.**

Ex-Armstrongites generally fall into one of three categories:

*1. Liberals*, such as Ernest L. Martin, former dean of Ambassador College’s England campus and chairman of the theology department at Pasadena. While lauding some of the recent changes, Martin and his followers feel that the WCG has not progressed far enough in the direction of correcting doctrinal and administrative errors. Martin’s Pasadena-based Foundation for Biblical Research maintains an active mailing list of 5,000 addresses and circulates a vast quantity of tapes and literature to its constituents. An advocate of universalism who believes sacraments to be unnecessary, Martin encourages his followers to worship informally in private homes, with the Holy Spirit as their minister and teacher, and to eschew organized ecclesiastical bodies.

*2. Moderates*—divided between the Associated Churches of God, Westminster, Maryland (led by former WCG regional directors Ken Westby and George Kemnitz), and the 20th Century Church of God, Vacaville, California (headed by former WCG executive Al Carrozzo and ex-minister D. L. Prunkard), who approve most of the changes but still adhere to certain WCG distinctives, such as the seventh-day Sabbath.

*3. Conservatives*—a small group led by former WCG evangelist Raymond C. Cole of Eugene, Oregon. Calling themselves the Church of God, the Eternal, Cole and his followers have renounced the WCG on the basis that it has forsaken the “faith once delivered” to Armstrong.

Within the WCG there seems to be general acceptance of the progressive reforms effected by GTA, Kuhn, and company. The exodus begun in 1974 is continuing, but it appears to have abated considerably. Ernest Martin contends that many members remain in the WCG by fear; they have been conditioned to believe that something terrible will happen to them if they leave God’s “one true church” and that ultimately they will burn in the lake of fire. Observers are puzzled by the fact that HWA’s credibility does not seem to have diminished even though a number of the doctrines he insists were “revealed” to him have been either modified or discarded.

The most recent of the anti-Armstrong movements is a group that crosses doctrinal lines. Its major concern is not theology but alleged corruption and immorality within the WCG. Timothy Nugent and John Trechak are the publishers of *Ambassador Review.* On the masthead of its debut issue in June, 1976, the purpose of the magazine is explained: “*Ambassador Review* is a journal by and for students, alumni, and friends of Ambassador College. Its goal is to provide an open forum for those who have shared in the ‘Ambassador Experience.’ It has grown out of the increasing need for a response to the censored and ideologically-controlled articles found in official Ambassador College and Worldwide Church of God publications.” Most of the fifty-page magazine is devoted to satirical articles criticizing WCG programs and policies. The publishers say that the soon-to-be-released second issue will contain more startling revelations of corruption and immorality.

Also much publicized within the ranks of the dissenters are three volumes by ex-WCG ministers: Marion McNair’s expose, *Armstrongism: Religion or Rip-Off?* was published early this year; William Hinson’s *The Broadway to Armageddon* is due to appear this spring; and Donald L. Prunkard’s *The Armstrong ‘Sting’* is being serialized in the 20th Century Church of God newsletter.

Veteran Armstrong-watcher Russell Chandler, permitted to observe a portion of the 1976 ministerial conference, wrote in the *Los Angeles Times* (May 29, 1976), “A picture emerged of a sect-like group maturing into a more mainstream organization.” Despite the efforts of its antagonists, the Armstrong empire seems to be reinforcing itself for its race against time to bring the Armstrong gospel to all the world.