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HERBERT W. ARMSTRONG: DOES HE REALLY HAVE THE 'PLAIN TRUTH'?

by LESLIE K. TARR

Two dissenters have a communications network to reach the far-flung radio, television and literature empire developed by the Worldwide Church of God. By radio alone the church and its spokesman, Herbert W. Armstrong and his son, Garner Ted, are probably within reach of 95 percent of all Americans and Canadians.

Since a radio listener somewhere in South Dakota, New Jersey, Manitoba or Alaska happens to pick up Armstrong's daily program, "The World Tomorrow," he is most impressed by its full hour of commentary and analysis of the world situation and its constant citation of biblical references.

The speaker, usually Garner Ted Armstrong, makes listeners to write for free booklets that address subjects on which he has preached during the broadcast. On the appeal they may be in a few lines of a program, The Plain Truth, but never an appeal for money.

Our imaginary listener, whether evangelist or not, through specific Bible teaching is made aware of an informed student of the Bible as he goes down any direction from truth. Furthermore, they are delivered in such a rapid-fire manner that he might have difficulty in denoting it.

Not in these any mention of a church on the program. Rather there are periodic references to Ambassador College, which publishes the literature, and to The Plain Truth magazine.

Maybe at the same time he is beginning to follow the broadcast, our fictitious listener picks up a copy of Reader's Digest. A familiar double page of notes has to write for some time of free literature or for The Plain Truth.

The slick, four-color, forty-eight-page publication is obviously designed to be a wide appeal. He checks for its pages, and it's free. Many more will send the reader that "although you cannot pay for your subscription, we do gratefully accept contributions voluntarily given. Though we never solicit the public for financial support," he is further informed that "many near co-workers" give graciously to underwrite the ministry.

Still no mention of any church!

Next he may see references to Ambassador College correspondence course (free, of course). Anyone who has reached the point that is a watershed enough to send for the course is probably a prime candidate for the Armstrong cult — of whose existence he is unaware.

The correspondence course starts on a low key, but he leaves without the pressure to "enroll" in the widespread against false churches and told that God has only one true church and that it must be "WORLDWIDE CHURCH." Those who have questions are requested to write to the editor (Herbert W. Armstrong) and are told to "be sure to mention you have completed lesson number of the Ambassador College Correspondence Course."

Subsequent lessons condemn the writing of pulp Sunday observance and consultation with doctors.

By issue twenty-eight, students are warned against churches which observe Saturday as the Sabbath, but which are not called by the name of God's Church "The Church of God." They are told that the true pattern of the true church are Herbert W. Armstrong and his son, Garner Ted Armstrong. They are interested are asked to communicate with Mr. Armstrong with a request to be visited by a "true and real" Jesus Christ.

All other churches, with an apparent exception, are dismissed as "false churches."

Local ministers of the Armstrong church call only on those who request it — and, in the present scheme for the hearing of the Word of God, apparently thousands are responding.

The minister's calling card doesn't betray his church affiliation. The card simply identifies him as a representative of Ambassador College.

If the prospect seems to have accepted the teaching (about the Sabbath, baptism, entry members and tithing) and appears to be submitting, the minister may accept him for baptism in immersion and then tell him of a local Saturday meeting of the Worldwide Church of God (formerly known as the Bible Church of God).

These extremely secretive Saturday services are held in about 350 locations across the United States and Canada. Although the local meetings are not a well-known feature of the movement and are barely mentioned in mere booklets about Armstrong, they probably account for a great deal of the growth and consolidation of the cult. They are never advertised and the public is decidedly not welcome.

The services are held in rented premises — usually a school auditorium or hall. Through these meetings and centrally appointed local ministers, the Pasadena headquarters can exercise a close oversight and control over individual followers. Printed directives from head quarters — some of a "read and destroy" variety — almost have the force of medieval papal decrees.

Then, because there are not the usual church building overhead costs, the total income of the local churches (these few are creative tithe) is paid to the Pasadena office. This accounts for the phenomenal success of the Worldwide Church of God (estimated at \$25 million annually), which permits it to print weekly literature and produce radio and television programs — while touting all and sundry that they are free.

So an imaginary radio listener now finds himself a member of a church which regards itself as God's one true church. He probably feels both and wonders if what part in that grand process he determined to call in to his Herbert W. Armstrong and his church — it was so inexpensive!

He will discover, however, that there is nothing about his relationship with the Worldwide Church of God. The church, through its ministry, will exercise an all-pervasive control of every phase of his life.

If he works somewhere with the Sabbath — from Friday sundown to Saturday sundown Sabbath — he is told to give it up. He will discover that the "cult" is no more 10 percent but according to one source, members, amounts to more than 20 percent. He has to give up his job, he may, like Paul Washer of Texas, find that he is not the dictator of the church's ministry, but has been ordered to leave his job. If like another member, he makes the mistake of communicating with an ex-minister of the cult, he may be expelled from the church.

Probably many others could wish the elderly brains were who really received, "I don't know what I was getting into when I joined."

One has to step at this point and ask more about the remarkable church. While other cults have been making a few headlines, the Worldwide Church of God has been making hay — and, in the process, reaping publicity as much as possible. Only recently, when a proprietary cult developed between "founder and apostle" Herbert W. Armstrong and his apparent son, Garner Ted, the name of the church appears so innocently and briefly in the media (see magazine, May 1972, "Garner Ted Armstrong, Where Are You?" and July 10, 1972, "Garner Ted Returns").

Even evangelists, who usually have a sensitive nose for cult activities, have often failed to be aware that the Worldwide Church of God simply must be reported as one of the major anti-Christian movements of our time. Because they are acquainted only with the Armstrong radio program, the television shows or The Plain Truth (all of which are attractive bait), they are unaware of the scarily cultic message of the Worldwide Church of God.

The problem is further complicated at this point by the understandable appeal of the Armstrong literature on such subjects as creation, the home, crime, juvenile delinquency and the ecological crisis. It seems to be calculated to appeal to the middle class and the religiously conservative.

But beneath that attractive exterior, what is the Worldwide Church of God?

Founder Herbert W. Armstrong, a former advertising man, had been associated with "The Church of God Seventh Day" in Oregon. He broke with this "cult" in 1927, and set up an offshoot of the Seventh Day Adventist Church, which he adopted "Bible Church" name and later his own church which, at first, was called "The Bible Church of God."

Armstrong had commenced broadcasting in early January of 1934 as a small radio station in Eugene, Oregon. With startling success, the Armstrong publicists tell us that the commencement of that broadcast set in motion the fulfillment of 90 percent of the prophecies of the Old Testament!

Again, in February of this year, Herbert W. Armstrong, now eighty years old, advanced this inflated estimate of himself: "Thousands know that I, personally, have been called and chosen for a very definite commission as God's servant."

The official history of the movement places the apostle "Herbert" in the same category as the apostle Paul. "Gave Christ Paul, who was highly educated, for spreading the gospel to the Gentiles. In these last days when the gospel must go beyond the world, you have a man simply trained in the advertising and business fields to shoulder the mission — Herbert W. Armstrong."

A group which has been conditioned to regard Armstrong as the modern-day apostle and the sole restorer of the gospel message is prepared to accept any and all of his teachings whether or not they square with Scripture. Anyone who has spoken with Worldwide Church of God members is aware of their unquestioning acceptance of his dogmas. It is an absolute obedience denied to any pope in modern times!

From the outset, the Armstrong gospel has included many elements of Seventh Day Adventism (although I am not suggesting that the Seventh Day Adventist Church is related in any way to his movement). For instance, he insists on a seventh day observance and regards Sunday worship as "the mark of the beast." He later "read down" rigid dietary laws, including the avoidance of pork.

Armstrong, however, proceeds much further and calls for abstinence of the "Passover, Pentecost, the Feast of Trumpets, the Day of Atonement and the Feast of Tabernacles." His church publishes a handy pocket calendar, "God's Holy Days," to remind the faithful of the dates of these obligatory fast days.

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Premier Goldie Meir of Israel, President Richard Nixon of the United States and Prime Minister Edward Heath of Great Britain (and, in mention, Queen Elizabeth) would marvel at Armstrong's verbal gymnastics and convoluted distinctions which permit him to come up with his British location.

Then, to his non-messianic view of himself, his apostle and "divinely" Seventh Day Adventism, his "Galatians" having, his borrowed British location, the apostle Herbert W. Armstrong adds the following: "We assure 'restoration of the Daily of Christ and the ex-cesses of the Trinity. Then came the Harlot's teaching (actually first associated in the Garden of Eden — Genesis 2:25 — by the serpent) that the faithful would become God."

REGARDING SALVATION, he holds that the blood of Christ does not really save any man and that no one is yet saved.

Mr. Armstrong and his son have propagated their composite heresy with a zeal that is remarkable — and with astonishing success. The Plain Truth, which began as a mimeographed paper in February, 1934, now has a circulation well over two million! The hour daily radio program is heard on more than 300 stations. In addition, the movement operates three call logs, each called Ambassador College — in Pasadena, California; Big Spring, Texas; and St. Albans, England. Visitors are ecstatic about the splendor of those centers.

Estimates vary as to membership in the Worldwide Church of God. Probably about 70,000 attend these weekly Saturday services. All are sure Herbert W. Armstrong speaks of 125,000 "co-workers" — the designation of those who support the work financially. The movement's influence, however, cannot be measured in statistical terms alone.

Herbert W. Armstrong, more than any other cultist, probably has a large sympathetic following in both liberal and evangelical churches. Satan Kuhn is correct: "I believe when he states 'Many Christians, in fact, will become highly incensed if are even implies that Herbert W. Armstrong's message is contrary to God's Word.'"

This confusion arises, of course, from Armstrong's own technique which gives wide exposure to his less identifiable, then positively confutes features of his message which he presents the wily cultic and heretical aspects after the program has become established in the Worldwide Church of God.

What accounts for his appeal to evangelicals and liberals?

His dogmatism probably appeals to those in liberal churches who yearn for a sense of conviction and authority. Starved for Bible teaching of any type, they respond to the Armstrong dogmatism and his apparent reverence to the Bible.

His appeal to evangelicals includes another in great part. Armstrong sounds relevant — and that's an awful lot — in terms of Bible truths to modern life, and provide the evangelist who may have little reference in his circles to contemporary issues, is attracted by Armstrong's attempts to bring his version of biblical insights to bear on crucial issues.

The rise and spread of the Worldwide Church of God indicates both the biblical ignorance and the spiritual void of our time.

While decisively rejecting its entirely Armstrongian, evangelicals would do well to examine the short space of thirty-eight years, have contributed to making the Worldwide Church of God today's top cultic threat.

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