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# Amazing grace, how bittersweet the sound, that 'saved' the Worldwide Church of God

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**LEWISVILLE, Texas**

For a quarter-century, John and Shirley Damore did everything Herbert W. Armstrong told them to: They tithed up to 30 percent of their income, followed Old Testament dietary laws, and sent their children to schools run by the Worldwide Church of God.

For this, the Damores and some 150,000 other church members expected that when Jesus returned to Earth – and that was any day now – they would be among the select few taken to "the place of safety," then transformed into godlike beings ushering in the Kingdom of Christ.

If that is where the story ended, the Worldwide Church of God would qualify as a uniquely American religious success story, like the Jehovah's Witnesses, who carved out an original theology and thrived by never deviating from it.

Instead, after Armstrong's death began one of the most remarkable transformations in American religious history: The church formally declared its founder had been fundamentally wrong all along and that the historic creeds of Christianity were the new gospel.

This spring, the Worldwide Church – once reviled as a cult in conservative Christian circles – was welcomed into the National Association of Evangelicals, a staggering turnaround for a group that once viewed the Catholic Church as the Whore of Babylon decried in Revelation and Protestant churches as the whore's harlot daughters.

How great a change is this? You can't compare it to the Mormons' decision to give up polygamy to assimilate with American culture. Instead, it would be more like the Mormons suddenly becoming Baptists.

The fallout from admitting its members have no faster route to eternal life than other Christians has devastated the church. Annual income has dropped from $200 million to $50 million, and membership plunged almost in half.

Three major breakaway denominations have formed, and the number of informal splinter groups could run into the thousands, says Dixon Cartwright, publisher of The Journal, an independent publication following the Churches of God.

The people who reject the changes – the ones who won't stop believing they soon will be raised up, while others wait 1,000 years for an uncertain judgment – consider themselves still the true church.

"I'm literally basing my life on that, my eternal life on it," says Rod Meredith, who left Worldwide to lead the new Global Church of God.

But for the thousands who had become estranged from children, neighbors and even spouses because of the old church's rigorous rules, the revolutionary turn toward orthodoxy is a breath of theological fresh air.

"I don't think anything could have been better than to have these changes," says Ron Walston, socializing with his family at the North Dallas Worldwide Church of God on a recent Saturday. "It's absolutely astounding, but it's absolutely wondrous."

In life, he had a penchant for private jet planes and meetings with world leaders. But in death, not even a separate headstone announces the final resting place of Herbert Armstrong.

Only a small stone marker tucked in a nondescript corner of the Mountain View Cemetery in Altadena, Calif., denotes the burial place of the former advertising salesman who used radio and television to build an international church, complete with three universities and a magnificent 55-acre headquarters in Southern California.

So powerful was Armstrong's presence that, for a short time after his death, some of his followers kept vigil by the site for his resurrection.

One of the first media-savvy evangelists, Armstrong, born in Des Moines to Quaker parents, took to the airwaves after several business setbacks and began the Radio Church of God in the 1930s.

Over the next five decades, the salesman-turned-preacher became known to millions of Americans with his "The World Tomorrow" broadcasts on nationwide radio and, later, television. The Plain Truth magazine further spread his compelling messages about the coming end of the age.

In 1968, as local churches sprang up across the country, the Radio Church of God metamorphosed into the Worldwide Church of God.



This is an undated file photo of Herbert W. Armstrong, founder of the Worldwide Church of God, who died in 1986. His church has fallen on hard times, losing membership since aligning itself with more traditional Christian belief. (AP Photo)

In his commanding yet paternal voice, Armstrong taught his flock that the Christian Church had lost its way as early as the first century, and that he was a special messenger in line with the Apostle Paul to restore the "true church."

Among his revelations: The Sabbath was on Saturday, not Sunday. Celebrating birthdays or Christian holidays such as Christmas and Easter was forbidden due to their "pagan" origins. Divorce was prohibited – although that restriction was loosened after Armstrong's own breakup with a much younger woman. And Old Testament dietary rules forbidding the eating of unclean meats should still be in force.

As membership increased, the money came rolling in from triple tithes. Members were required to contribute 10 percent of their income, spend 10 percent on celebrating the Feast of Tabernacles and – two out of every seven years – donate another 10 percent for charitable work.

But if the demands were great, the potential payoff was huge.

Church members, Armstrong promised, would be physically protected during the Great Tribulation preceding the Second Coming of Christ – an event he periodically predicted was imminent. Once Jesus returned, they would be instantaneously changed from mortal to immortal, helping Christ rule over the universe for the next 1,000 years, at the end of which the rest of humanity would be judged.

"We always felt we were part of a very exclusive community," says Mary Allgeyd, a church member in Glendora, Calif. "How grateful we were! I know I was. I felt good being part of the inside group."

The system worked as long as Armstrong's autocratic rule held things together. But when Armstrong died in 1986 at the age of 92, Plain Truth editor Greg Albrecht recalls standing by his grave at the funeral and wondering what would happen to the church.

"He was dead now ... That began a giant upheaval in my worldview," Albrecht says.

Originally, Armstrong's son, Garner Ted, was supposed to succeed him, but he was cast out of the church during the 1970s.

Instead, Joseph Tkach Sr. took over, and Armstrong's teachings began to slowly unravel in the eyes of church leaders, who were now free to read outside theological sources and to follow Armstrong's own oft-repeated dictum: "Don't believe me. Read the Bible."

There, they came to agree with traditional Christian interpretations of salvation by faith, and to view other Christians with newborn respect.

One by one, they discarded Armstrong's rules for Christian living, and his portraits began to disappear from church buildings.

Tkach made the break with Armstrong definitive in 1995, telling members that even tithing and Saturday Sabbath-keeping were no longer mandatory in the "new covenant."

In retrospect, departing from Armstrong's vision was like awakening from a coma, says Pastor General Joseph Tkach Jr., who took over after his father's death in 1995.

"Once we saw and recognized the truth, and a period of time goes by, I keep hitting myself on the head: How could I have believed this?" he says.

But with each step away from the old theology, members and money dropped precipitously. All three universities were closed, the television programs were discontinued and monthly circulation of Plain Truth magazine plunged from a free 8 million to a paid 125,000.

Today, the Pasadena church headquarters effectively serve as Armstrong's mausoleum. A security guard and receptionist are the only people visible on the massive first floor of the administration hall. Other buildings are shuttered, and the great reflecting pools outside Ambassador Auditorium are dry.

Still, church officials never considered turning back.

"In fact, we have found the pearl of great price, Jesus who is savior and Lord," Albrecht says.

"I think we're just one of the ways, one of the many examples through time that God can do anything," he says. "We're just a small footnote in history that, by the way, when God wants to act, he acts."

That does not mean, of course, that the Worldwide Church would not like its members back.

"My secret desire is that as time continues," Tkach says, "God is going to open the minds and hearts of all these people who were formerly with us in these splinter groups to see the truth."

That doesn't sound likely.

In the eyes of Meredith, what Worldwide has done is consistent with biblical passages in 2 Thessalonians warning of a great falling away, a great apostasy as the end time nears – even in the church.

Once the Bible teacher of people like Tkach and Albrecht, a man many say was upset at being passed over to succeed Armstrong, Meredith became one of the first to leave Worldwide and begin a new church. Global, which he started with 40 people in Pasadena in 1992, now has some 8,000 members.

"We feel we have the truth, what we believe is the full truth of God," Meredith says.

And so do the other groups that splintered off from Worldwide, the largest of which is the 17,000-member Arcadia, Calif.-based United Church of God.

United member Dixon Cartwright says Worldwide members weren't unhappy just with the dramatic changes in their church's doctrine; they also resented that the radical reforms were imposed from the top down, with no discussion and seemingly little forethought as to their impact.

Consider, for example, that, in Armstrong's theology, everyone eventually would be resurrected to eternal life and saved from the Lake of Fire – except the approximately 1 percent of the population who knew the truth and rejected it.

But that's exactly what church members are being told to do now – reject what once was held up as the truth.

"They came here for a reason and, when that reason was taken away, they either had to give it up or cling to it and go elsewhere," says Larry Salyer, a Global spokesman.

That's why Fred Dattilo, an accountant at Worldwide until last year, chose Global, the church that most strictly follows Armstrong's old theology.

"The way of life, for me personally, my wife, too, brought us so much understanding, peace and fulfillment," Dattilo says. "The church was able to explain to me the mysteries of life in a way nobody else could."

There is only one stoplight in Big Sandy, Texas – population 1,258 – but the town has more than doubled on this warm May day, for the final graduation at Ambassador University.

Members from Worldwide, United and Global are gathered together one last time to witness the closing of the final jewel in Armstrong's religious empire.

"Are we going to be sad? Yes, we're going to be sad. We also should be very pumped," student body president Kwan Borden told his classmates. "In a few years, we're going to be classics."

As the Worldwide Church of God discards the final links to its past, its challenge is to figure out what will now set it apart.



John and Shirley Damore sing during a service at the North Dallas Worldwide Church of God in Lewisville, Texas, on May 17. The couple, longtime members of the church, now split their allegiance with an interdenominational Christian church. (AP Photo)



Joseph Tkach Jr., a leader of the Worldwide Church of God, presents a diploma to a graduate of the church's Ambassador University in Big Sandy, Texas, on May 19. It was the final graduation ceremony for the small college, which is closing its doors in the wake of the church's decline in membership. (AP Photo)

Already, some members and even entire congregations have switched to evangelical churches. And without Armstrong's unique theology to bind them, will other members continue to drive an hour or two to gather at a Worldwide service when they now are free to attend the church down the street?

Lana Reivvo of Glendora, Calif., and her husband were former Worldwide members who came back when the church no longer said it had the exclusive way to God.

"I always knew that there were a group of people who right or wrong – mostly wrong – loved God," she says. "What I was afraid of when we got rid of the us-against-them, we would lose our sense of family, our sense of identity."

But she notes that the new church has kept its close-knit relationships among members, while adding opportunities for lay and women's ministries.

At the Worldwide Church of God in North Dallas, David Butler used to tell his Baptist mother she wouldn't be among those in the first resurrection unless she changed her faith. But, as a black man, he himself was tortured by his allegiance to an institution that once kept black children out of church schools and taught that people from England and America were special descendants of the tribes of Israel.

It showed Armstrong's power that he would have stayed in a church with such teachings, Butler says. With the changes, however, Butler no longer has to suppress his heritage.

"Now, it seems they're allowing you to be yourself, to represent your culture," he says. "To me, it has set me free."

John and Shirley Damore also could not be happier about the new Worldwide.

Though they were raised in the church, none of their five kids is a member today. But the Damores no longer need agonize about their children being caught up in the Great Tribulation.

In fact, while they still attend Saturday services at the North Dallas Worldwide Church of God, on Sundays they go with their two sons to a conservative, interdenominational Christian Church – where they were recently baptized.

"We have the best of both worlds," John Damore says.

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