

What's the plain truth about the W in Herbert W. Armstrong?

by J. Phillip Arnold

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HOUSTON, Texas--It must have been the spring semester in 1970 that I waited in line after a Sabbath service in Pasadena to ask Mr. Herbert W. Armstrong a question that I had wondered about.

I recall feeling some trepidation about approaching him. This anxiety came not simply because of the nature of the question, but also just from the fact that I was going to shake hands and look into the eyes and direct an interrogative toward the apostle himself, a man not known to suffer fools gladly.

Initial nervousness

Standing aside as others spoke with him that Sabbath afternoon, I tried to appear unobtrusive, casting my eyes up at the ceiling and then down toward the floor, and then all around; not fixating on the man, avoiding the impression that I was eavesdropping on the pearls of wisdom being cast toward those before him.

Before long, my turn came to make my approach and greet the man and cast my question.

Looking back, it is rather puzzling why, after years of studying the arcane doctrines and lore of the WCG, I wanted badly to have this particular question answered.

Maybe it had to do with the uncontroversial, decidedly nontheological, nature of my inquiry. A question about the 1,335 days of Daniel 12 or the 19-year time cycles, or the date for entering Petra, might get me gulagged for a grand ol' time in the Inquisition. Whatever.

Receptive clasp

At any rate, I respectfully shook his small hand with an Ambassador-trained firm grip, remotely noticing that his hand was soft and pliable, not at all aggressive or controlling. This made me think he might be receptive to my probing interrogative.

After giving my name and mentioning that I was a senior at the Pasadena campus now that I had recently transferred from Big Sandy, I said I had a question I had wondered about.

I almost added had "often" wondered about, but I deleted that adverb, realizing that to add that to the verb could be interpreted by this discerning man as a rather abnormal fixation on minutiae indicative of a spiritual malady in need of fasting and prayer for its cure.

Relieved that I had perchance sidestepped a mine that would have likely set off an apostolic explosion, I moved on to frame my question.

Mr. HWA's eyes indicated, by their narrowing, that he began to grasp that a question, of all things, was being leveled at him.

Just what did he mean?

I let loose the quizment somewhat as follows: "Mr. Armstrong, I have read your autobiography in *The Plain Truth* and do not see what the *W* in your name stands for. You know, that *W* between the

Herbert and the Armstrong. Just what do you mean by the *W* in Herbert W. Armstrong? Mr. Armstrong, what does the *W* in your name stand for?"

The slight jerk of the head, the eyes now near slits, a metathought could well be arising in his brain that the young man standing before him might be one of those deviant students who came to question, to distort, to wreck.

But then the double take and doubt lifted like a misbegotten mist, and his face softened, like his hand, and he matter-of-factly replied:

"Nothing. It stands for nothing. I added it years ago."

I believe he said something about needing to add an identifying letter for postal purposes and that he wanted a letter that worked well with his name.

Rooted incident

He did not overspeak. He seemed to feel a bit diminished, not being able to say that the *W* stood for something like Westinghouse or Westmoreland or Willy.

To admit "nothing" seemed a bit hard for him to let out. But he did, and he did it with honest plainness. He seemed relieved to let it out. He apparently felt okay trusting me with his admission.

Looking back, I think perhaps it was the contrast of this plain speech, learned from his Quaker upbringing, with the bombastic orations that normally boomed from Mr. HA that rooted this incident in my memory to this day.

I liked him that day and the way he went about confessing that he, unlike most of us, had no middle name.

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