

GCI: From the Fringe to the Fold

How the Worldwide Church of God discovered the plain truth of the gospel

For most of a half-century, no book on cults was complete without a chapter on the Worldwide Church of God (WCG) and its founder, Herbert W. Armstrong. The late Walter Martin, in his classic *The Kingdom of the Cults*, devoted 34 pages to the group, documenting how Armstrong borrowed freely from Seventh-day



Adventist, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Mormon doctrines. And it was during my own research and writing on cults and new religions in 1988 that I became aware that something unusual was happening.

I had earlier written to the Pasadena headquarters requesting literature and statistics from the WCG but had received no response. Then came that phone call I will never forget. It was from Michael Snyder, assistant to the director of public relations, who had just discovered my letter and was calling to find out if there was still time to incorporate new information into my book.

The conversation that followed was nothing short of astonishing. I knew that Armstrong had died in 1986 and that Joseph Tkach, Sr., had succeeded him as pastor general. But I was not aware of changes that signaled a dramatic turnaround in the church.

From Snyder I learned that books written by Armstrong, once the defining literature of the movement, were being revised or taken out of print. I also learned that Joseph Tkach, Sr., had informed the church membership that he would not shrink from his responsibility to correct any doctrine proven to be in error. But most astonishing was Snyder's own testimony of faith, which convinced me he was a brother in Christ.

In the years following, I have had many more meetings with leaders in the church and have closely followed every change in doctrine and practice that has transformed this heretical sect into an evangelical denomination. I am

taken aback by the transparency and open profession of faith by these Christians who, by their own testimony, have come out of a “fog of legalism.”

It is not easy for a religious movement to make sweeping changes—or even less than sweeping changes. The Christian Reformed Church, for instance, has been ravaged over the last several years by the debate over women in office. Families and churches have split over the issue, and whole congregations have left the denomination.

Magnify that scenario many times over, and there is some sense of what is occurring in the WCG. There is pain and heartbreak in families and congregations, and thousands have made the wrenching decision to leave the only church they have ever known. But those remaining celebrate a new-found freedom in Christ while at the same time they mourn the loss of friends and family and the fractured church communities.

The “changes”—as they are referred to by insiders—are truly historic. Never before in the history of Christianity has there been such a complete move to orthodox Christianity by an unorthodox fringe church.

The businessman prophet

But for the modest size of his movement, Herbert W. Armstrong was a well-known figure in religious circles for most of half a century. It was hard to find anyone who had not seen an issue of *The Plain Truth* magazine or heard The World Tomorrow radio and television broadcasts. In the minds of evangelicals, the WCG was viewed as a classic case study of an authoritarian cult, headed by a “prophet” founder who led his devoted followers away from biblical orthodoxy into man-made doctrines.

In many ways, Herbert W. Armstrong was larger than life. Salesman turned radio preacher, he had a compelling way with words. His fatherly wisdom and prophetic warnings drew millions of listeners—and, more important, more than two hundred thousand devoted followers who over the decades enlisted in his “one true church.”

Armstrong was born into a Quaker family in Des Moines, Iowa, in 1892. At 25, he and his third cousin, Loma Dillon, were married in a Baptist church,

and from that union four children were born. In those years, financial success was his driving vision, but his work in advertising sales was plagued by financial reverses.

It was during one of these reverses that Armstrong, prodded by Loma, began looking into the issue of Sabbath (Saturday) worship. “And so it was that in the fall of 1926—crushed in spirit from business reverses not of my making—humiliated by what I regarded as wifely religious fanaticism, that I entered into an in-depth study of the Bible for the first time in my life.”

This was the beginning of Armstrong’s religious pilgrimage—a pilgrimage that took him from wanting “to accept Jesus Christ as personal Savior” to leading a vast religious empire.

Soon after his conversion he joined the Oregon Conference of the Church of God, by whom he was also ordained. He compared his preparation for ordination to that of Jesus, who like himself, had gone through “three and a half years of intensive instruction and experience” before “sending out the original disciples into the ministry.”

Three years after his ordination, Armstrong took to the airwaves, and The Radio Church of God was born. The broadcast, *The World Tomorrow*, featured prophecy based on biblical texts and current events and quickly turned Armstrong into a minor celebrity. Soon he was publishing *The Plain Truth* magazine, which provided the radio audience his prophetic speculations in print.

By the late 1940s, with a loyal following contributing financially to his ministry, Armstrong moved to Pasadena, where the stage was set for a media outreach that would expand worldwide in the decades that followed. Then, in 1968, the name of the movement was changed to reflect that expansion—the Worldwide Church of God.

In the years that followed, Armstrong, with the assistance of sophisticated financial advisers, turned what had been a small-town religious broadcast into a vast media empire. With an advance team initiating photo opportunities, he traveled the world shaking hands with heads of state.

These journeys served as the backdrop to cover stories in *The Plain Truth* and features on *The World Tomorrow*—always with a prophetic twist.

At home in Pasadena, Armstrong held tight reins over his diverse empire. His authority was unquestioned by most church members, whose loyalty was indicated by their financial support. A triple tithe was the standard: 10 percent for regular giving, 10 percent for benevolent support of needy members, and 10 percent to cover the expenses of the annual Feast of Tabernacles.

Armstrong's initial focus in religious matters had centered on the Sabbath. But as time went on, Sabbath-keeping became the least controversial of his biblical and theological "discoveries." From the earliest years he viewed himself as the apostle for this age and his movement to be the "true" church—uniquely designed to represent God's kingdom in the end times.

As the leader of the true church, Armstrong saw himself as a messenger—in the company of only two others—uniquely chosen by God: "Jesus chose Paul, who was highly educated, for spreading the gospel to the Gentiles. He later raised up Peter Waldo, a successful businessman, to keep His truth alive during the Middle Ages. In these days ... Jesus chose a man amply trained in the advertising and business fields to shoulder the mission—Herbert W. Armstrong."

Religious smorgasbord

The WCG disseminated a wide variety of novel religious tenets. Armstrong vehemently opposed the doctrine of the Trinity. "There is not one God, but two," he wrote. "God the Father, the Possessor of heaven and earth, the Father of Jesus Christ; and the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the active Creator of heaven and earth—the One who became Jesus Christ."

The WCG belief in a "God Family" has been likened to the Mormon belief that the faithful will one day attain godhood. "Our potential," wrote Armstrong, "is to be born into the God Family, receiving total power! We are to be given jurisdiction over the entire universe!... We shall impart life to billions and billions of dead planets." A WCG publication offered further clarification: "At

the time of the resurrection we shall be instantaneously changed from mortal into immortal—we shall then be God!”

The belief most often associated with the WCG is typically referred to as British (or Anglo) Israelism. Speculation that the “lost Ten Tribes” of Israel had migrated into Europe and North America was not new with Armstrong. But Armstrong uniquely developed this belief, weaving it into the very fabric of his eschatological tapestry. Britain descended from Ephraim and the U.S. from Manasseh, and as such inherited “the Birthright which God had promised to Abraham through Isaac, Jacob and Joseph.”

Armstrong started his eschatological timetable with the “pivotal prophecy” of Leviticus 26 (“then I will punish you seven times more for your sins”), which he dated at 718 B.C. He then worked forward with the “seven times,” which he insisted were actually seven years of 360 days. Converting those days back into years, he calculated 2,520 years since 718 B.C., which brought him to the beginning of the nineteenth century. “After 2,520 years—God did cause the birthright nations—and them only—to become suddenly the recipients of such national wealth, greatness and power as no nation or empire ever before had acquired!”

Some of the doctrinal distinctives of the WCG that most Christians would deem nonessential became important points of separation between the “true” church and the churches of this world. For example, according to Armstrong, Jesus was crucified on Wednesday—not on Friday—and rose from the dead on Saturday. This was not a minor point of difference; it was the New Testament’s confirmation of Sabbath-keeping.

Lifestyle issues also became key points of church identity. Like many other churches of past generations, “worldly” adornment precluded make-up and short hair for women (long hair for men). And divorce was not permitted, nor were people who had divorced and remarried allowed to join the church without separating. Smoking was likewise prohibited, and Sabbath-keeping was a must—with no “leisure” activities allowed.

Like Jehovah’s Witnesses and certain other sectarian groups, members were strictly forbidden to celebrate holidays: Christmas, Easter, Valentine’s Day—

anything associated with pagan or unchristian origins. Other prohibitions confronting members of the WCG—similar to those of Jehovah’s Witnesses—included involvement in the military or in voting and holding governmental office.

But unlike some legalistic religions, followers of Armstrong did not shun all festivities. Indeed, drinking (in moderation), dancing, card playing, and movie going were permitted.

Likewise, there were holy days and celebrations that offered ample opportunity for family and church social gatherings, most notably the Feast of Tabernacles, the church’s annual religious convention that featured worship and family activities. Other Jewish holy days marked by the WCG were the Passover, the Feast of Unleavened Bread, Pentecost, the Feast of Trumpets, the Day of Atonement, and the Last Great Day (from [Lev. 23:36](#)).

And as with Jehovah’s Witnesses, disfellowshipping was the most feared means of church discipline—a punishment that might be administered for something as seemingly innocuous as going to a relative’s home for Christmas dinner.

Something afoot

It was amidst this atmosphere of fear and insecurity that changes began to occur in the late 1980s following Armstrong’s death. There had been previous reversals in church belief and practice—including a back and forth policy regarding women wearing make-up and a move toward leniency on the issue of divorce. And there had been earlier challenges to Armstrong’s authoritarian control, during which time ministers and members drifted away or left to form their own splinter groups.

The most widely publicized split occurred in 1978, when Armstrong dismissed his son Garner Ted Armstrong from his high-profile position due to alleged sexual misconduct. Garner Ted then founded his own Church of God International, which he headed until 1995 when there were further charges of sexual misconduct.



The top of the pyramid: Herbert W. Armstrong confers with his future successor, Joseph Tkach Sr. (early 1980s).

But never before had the church been rocked from its foundations as it has been in the decade since Armstrong's death, with the church under the leadership of Joseph Tkach, Sr. Many ask how such a turnaround could occur. And if it could happen with the WCG, could it also happen among the Mormons or the Jehovah's Witnesses?

In some ways, the situation relating to the WCG has been unique, and three favorable factors in particular opened the way for the changes.

First was the role of Armstrong himself. He alone headed the movement for some 50 years, and his death left a vacuum and an opening for new leadership with access to the same control he wielded.

Second was the biblical outlook of Armstrong. For all his heresies and errors, he always insisted that the Bible alone was the foundation for his teachings, and he never claimed additional revealed scriptures such as the Mormons have.

And third, his successor, Joseph Tkach, Sr., and his associates were serious about allowing the Bible to speak for itself. That can be a dangerous approach for a sectarian group, and in this case it had the effect of making the movement orthodox.

It is this third factor that has been in process for the past ten years. And here lies the truly historic aspect of this story—a story that has no precedent in the history of cultic movements.

Some speculate that Joseph Tkach, Sr., with his new belief system intact, might have been waiting in the wings in 1986, ready to spring into action once he was at the helm. But that is not how it happened. He was only one of several who, freed from the awesome Armstrong presence, began to see truths in Scripture that had previously been obscured.

The process moved slowly, and one challenge to “Armstrongism” often painstakingly led to another. And there was no easy consensus.

While one of Tkach’s associates was moving ahead, another was getting cold feet. And Tkach himself at times feared where the process would lead. But when one of Armstrong’s errors was toppled, time and again another one logically—and biblically—was forced to follow. And so went the house of cards.

The tumultuous year

By January of 1995, there was a clear consensus at the top—and among many pastors and laypeople as well—that there was no turning back. It was then that Tkach, Sr., issued a document on the “new covenant” that would enunciate for any still in doubt that the church had departed from Armstrong’s teachings.

Here, among other things, he focused on the Sabbath: “There is nothing in the new covenant that says we are required to keep the Sabbath according to the rules of the old covenant.... Being Sabbath-keepers does not make us more righteous than other Christians.”

1995 became the tumultuous year. The “new covenant” proclamation unleashed pent-up emotions that had been, in some cases, simmering for years. The Pasadena headquarters was suddenly inundated with protests and resignations, including that of David Hulme, television host for *The World Tomorrow*. In his letter of resignation, he asserted that the “so called ‘new truths’” were “in fact rather old errors,” and accused Joseph Tkach of already believing these new truths when he succeeded Armstrong in 1986.

The trickle out of the church seemed to turn into a flood in 1995. At a conference in Indianapolis in early May, the United Church of God (UCG) was

formed and, unlike previous splinter groups, posed a serious threat to the WCG. Former WCG directors and pastors were among the 150 “elders” who gathered in Indianapolis to select a board and name David Hulme, who had also served the WCG in public relations, as chairman.

By year’s end, the number of those affiliated with the movement was estimated to be 17,000, far exceeding the size of any of the other splinter groups. They justified the new movement, saying: “Long-held beliefs members have dearly sacrificed for have been officially negated and replaced by doctrines that are diametrically opposed to the teachings that led members into the church.”

In the end, more than a third of the ministers left the Worldwide Church of God. The west coast of Florida was one of the hardest hit regions of the country, but other areas experienced similar turbulence. In Sedona, Arizona, Pastor Rand Holm and his wife, Beth, tell of the wrenching pain they felt when a sizable group of faithful church-goers left their congregation.

The losses in Florida and Arizona have been reflected in membership losses throughout the country. U.S. membership in 1986 stood at 89,000. Today the membership is 49,000. “So it shows,” laments Joseph Tkach, Jr., “that 40,000 people no longer attend with us. It is the price we’ve paid to make these changes.”

The loss of leaders and members has resulted in financial loss. Church income dropped 50 percent in 1995. Severance pay arrangements for administrators and local ministers who have left the church combined with the decrease in giving has required painful cutbacks that are as wrenching as were the church ruptures. Many long-time, faithful employees are no longer on the church payroll.

Adding to the wrenching pain, uncertainty of finances, and fractured friendships and churches, Pastor General Joseph Tkach, Sr., himself was experiencing pain and uncertainty as he battled cancer. At the very time that the “changes” were coming to fruition—at the peak of his ministry—it appeared doubtful whether he would live to enjoy the “Golden Age” that he had set into motion. And on September 23, 1995, he died at age 68.

Greg Albrecht's prayer at Tkach's memorial service sums up the profound influence of this man who rose out of obscurity to change the course of church history: "We will leave his body behind, but we will take his memory and his legacy with us. We will, in his words, not only keep the faith, we will share it and we will spread it. We will proclaim Jesus Christ and the gospel of salvation; the good news that we have in Christ, the new life we have in him."

The new covenant

One way to sum up the enormity of the doctrinal changes in the WCG is by contrasting the old covenant teaching. This pilgrimage is summed up by Joseph Tkach, Jr., who succeeded his late father as pastor general:

For decades we regarded the law of Moses as the basis of our righteousness. We attempted to relate to God through old covenant rules and regulations.

In his mercy, God has shown us that old covenant obligations do not apply to Christians, who are under the new covenant. He has led us into the riches of his grace and a renewed relationship with Jesus Christ. He has opened our hearts and minds to the joy of his salvation. The Scriptures speak to us with fresh meaning, and we rejoice daily in the personal relationship we have with our Lord and Savior.

The new covenant teaching has also brought a new outlook on the mission of the church and its organizational structure. The Great Commission "to preach the gospel of Christ and make disciples of all nations" is now fully operative. And to accomplish that, full mobilization is necessary.

Tkach continues: "In the past, our organizational model ... was like a pyramid. At the top of the pyramid a few people instructed those below to simply do what they were told.... Now we see that model as being unbiblical and we are moving toward a model that recognizes everyone's spiritual gifts. This new model is inclusive and will require every member to think and contribute."

Recognizing "unbiblical teaching," "errors," and "heresies" has been only the first step in the process of change. Confession of these errors and reconciliation with the wider Christian church are ongoing. The confessions of wrong have come in two forms. Joseph Tkach, Jr., has issued an apology on

behalf of the church collectively. And other public apologies have come in personal confessions.

Greg Albrecht, editor of *The Plain Truth*, looks back on his pastoral ministry with many regrets. In fact, he speaks of it in terms of abuse—telling stories of how he would make a pastoral visit with an accompanying elder who would excuse himself to go to the bathroom to check the medicine chest for medications (banned by the church); or how he permitted his own son to be involved in sports competitions on Friday night (after the Sabbath had begun), while preaching against such activities from the pulpit.

A “new understanding” of church governance insures that never again will one individual (assisted by a few “insiders”) control church affairs. This was the legacy of Armstrong, and it was one of the “errors” that allowed Armstrong’s successor, Joseph Tkach, Sr., to implement such far-reaching changes in church doctrine and practice.

A board of directors now leads the church, and pastors have already begun to have far greater autonomy than they had previously. Independent thinking is encouraged on matters pertaining to eschatology and pacifism, and Sabbath-keeping and celebrating the holidays are left up to the individual.

This spirit of independence is perhaps most noticeable on the Internet. Here the “Good News Grapevine” offers WCG members a forum to interact freely about doctrinal changes and to encourage one another. The “good news” is featured, as pastors and lay people share ideas and information and personal testimonies that advance the new covenant teachings.

Walter Neufeld, a pastor from Milwaukee, writes: “One of the biggest benefits to our new perspective is the trend away from being judgmental of each other and of people `in the world.’ We had made a science out of separating ourselves from others, and our new understanding is similar to the effect of sunshine breaking through the clouds on a dreary day.”

From New York City, pastor Jeff Broadnax confides: “I felt more comfortable talking about the Holy Days, unclean meats and the Sabbath than I did about Christ. Well, Christ has become my focus and everything else is secondary.”

Another sign of openness in the WCG is the new focus on women's ministries. At the regional pastors' conferences women now have their separate Sunday morning sessions, sharing freely about ideas for local church women's ministries programs.

Connections: A Journal by and for Ministers Wives, edited by Tammy Tkach, addresses a wide variety of issues that deal directly with women's concerns. This unprecedented support for women's involvement in ministry is motivated largely by the new perspective on mission and evangelism that necessitates full mobilization of the church.

With all the turmoil of recent years, there is no doubt that a new day has dawned on the WCG. From the pastor general to the people in the pews, lives have been transformed. The last personal column in *The Plain Truth* from Joseph Tkach, Sr., reflected on this new era: "God has blessed me to see the beginning of the golden age of the Worldwide Church of God. He has given me the overwhelming joy to witness his Holy Spirit at work in a miraculous way to lead us out of entrenched doctrinal errors into the pure light of his glorious gospel."

Where from here?

What accounts for the dramatic changes that have occurred over the past decade? Only prayer and a moving of the Spirit can make sense of these remarkable changes. Don Mears, a long-time church pastor, tells a story that is not unique among members and pastors:

During the late 1970s I was preparing for a Bible study series on the Epistle to the Romans, and began to study the epistle in more depth than I ever had before. I was dismayed at what I found, as I began to realize how far our preaching and practice in the church had strayed into legalism and away from the gospel of grace that Paul described. Ever since that time, my wife and I have been praying for the church to come to a deeper understanding of the grace of God.

But what about Herbert W. Armstrong? What would he think about these answered prayers? And where would he be most comfortable if he were magically to reappear today? Which "Church of God" would most

enthusiastically welcome him into their fellowship? Must the WCG renounce him in their commitment to biblical faith? Must their confession of faith include a denunciation of their founder?

Insiders have varying views of this larger-than-life figure. Some admit that he taught heresy and error: others emphasize how he taught his followers to “grow in the grace and knowledge of Christ.”

But there is one thing on which they agree: he stands in history as the founder of the Worldwide Church of God and as its leader for 50 years. His portrait still hangs in the hallway at Ambassador University and at the Pasadena headquarters.

Acceptance into mainstream evangelicalism has come slowly—and there has been, in some instances, opposition, largely from “cult-watching groups” that, in the words of Joseph Tkach, Jr., made the journey ten times more difficult.”

But there have been exceptions. Hank Hanegraaff of the Christian Research Institute, successor to the late Walter Martin on The Bible Answer Man broadcast, speaks with a different voice: “Rather than developing hurdles for these guys to jump over, our job is to facilitate the process.” In a recent radio interview with Tkach, Jr., and Albrecht, Hanegraaff introduced them as “brothers in the Lord.”

D. James Kennedy, senior minister of Coral Ridge Presbyterian Church in Florida, says: “This is the most astonishing change that I have ever seen or heard of in any religious group, for which I, for one, praise God.”

Adds Richard Mouw, president of Fuller Theological Seminary: “I have met with the leadership of the church, and without reservation consider them brothers in Christ. I am profoundly moved by their testimonies of what God has done for them personally and in the movement. These people have led the most courageous, inspiring, and Christ-centered movement into biblical Christianity that I have ever seen.”

The turnaround in this movement shows how hungry people are for an authentic Christian gospel. The legalism that characterizes so many of the

cultic and sectarian movements—and segments of the evangelical church—simply does not satisfy people spiritually.

Likewise, the broader Christian community would do well to take note of the vitality of faith that is so evident in this church. Pastors and lay Christians alike are digging into the Bible to check out this “new covenant” teaching for themselves.

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