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The Worldwide Church of God: Resurrected into Orthodoxy

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Herbert W. Armstrong died in 1986 at the patriarchal age of 93, and his Worldwide Church of God has been burying portions of his theology ever since. During this decade-long funeral, the WCG itself has experienced an institutional suffering and dying, losing 130 or more of its 450 ministers and seeing at least 30,000 members scatter into 25 splinter churches or out of church life entirely.

WCG leaders have chosen this path of suffering resulting from years of what they describe as the persistent leading of the Holy Spirit. The Worldwide Church of God is one of the few church bodies with a corporate sense that those who die to themselves will rise to new spiritual life. The death of certain WCG doctrines has led to the denomination's resurrection into orthodoxy.

A Brief History. Reared as a Quaker, Armstrong joined the Oregon Conference of the Church of God in the late 1920s and by 1931 was ordained as one of its ministers.

Armstrong founded the Radio Church of God in 1934, broadcasting his prophecy-oriented "The World Tomorrow" program from Eugene, Oregon. He began publishing *The Plain Truth* as a mimeographed newsletter. That magazine's title (unlike the evangelical content that now appears within its full-color pages) is one of the few icons of Armstrong left unchanged by the sweeping reforms of recent years.

After World War II Armstrong moved his headquarters to Pasadena, California, and the denomination has been a prestigious, if controversial, civic institution ever since. He adopted the name Worldwide Church of God in 1968.

Following accusations of sexual misconduct in 1971 Armstrong's handsome son and heir-apparent, Garner Ted, was relieved of his WCG duties, reinstated, then relieved of his duties again. In 1978 Garner Ted Armstrong founded the Church of God International, a movement he led until November 1995, when a lawsuit charging him with sexual assault caused him to step down.

Distinctives. The Worldwide Church of God became known for an assortment of doctrinal distinctives that placed it at odds with historic Christianity. Among other aberrations, Armstrong:

- Condemned the Trinity as a pagan doctrine.
- Taught that "all saints" become little gods after their resurrection.
- Denied that Christians can be born again prior to the resurrection.
- Promoted Anglo-Israelism, the belief that British people are the literal descendants of the ten "lost" tribes of Israel.
- Urged keeping the Old Testament law, including strict Sabbath observance and dietary restrictions.

- Prohibited celebrating Christmas or Easter, which he condemned as pagan holidays. (Instead, WCG members observed seven Holy Days: Passover, the Festival of Unleavened Bread, Pentecost, the Festival of Trumpets, the Day of Atonement, the Festival of Tabernacles, and the Last Great Day.)
- Forbade members to consult medical doctors when sick.
- Stressed tithing to a legalistic extreme. (Strictly observant WCG members gave 30 percent: 10 percent for a regular tithe, 10 percent to support the annual Feast of Tabernacles, and 10 percent intended to support widows and orphans within the WCG)
- Forbade members to remarry after divorce and insisted that they remain celibate if they remarried after divorce.
- Insisted that the WCG was the only true church.
- Closed the movement's doors to visitors and welcomed only converts.

Tkach Begins Reforms. Under the leadership of Joseph Tkach, Sr., a few WCG practices began changing even before Herbert Armstrong's death. Armstrong appointed Tkach as director of church administration in 1979, and Tkach soon began dismantling the authoritarian structure in local congregations, recalls Mike Feazell, executive assistant to the Pastor General. "To Herbert Armstrong's credit, he appreciated that [change], supported it and promoted it."

Armstrong appointed Tkach as his successor before his death, and Tkach chose his son, Joseph Jr., as his successor in 1995. The elder Tkach died in September 1995 at age 68 of complications from cancer.

"There was in Mr. Tkach a strong desire to teach the truth," Feazell said. "As questions arose, he believed it was important to honor those questions, and to answer them. There are things Herbert Armstrong taught that were not biblical, and we had assumed they were."

The changing WCG also shelved Anglo-Israelism, withdrawing Armstrong's book *The United States and Britain in Prophecy* from circulation in 1991, Feazell said.

WCG leaders rejected previous teachings about medicine, keeping the Old Testament law, Sabbatarianism, and tithing.

Most dramatic of all, WCG leaders now believe in the Trinity, teach salvation by grace, and acknowledge that Christians attend other churches.

Painful Losses. Doctrinal change has cost the church dearly in members and income. WCG officials estimate that financial support plunged 35 percent in 1995, following a 10 percent drop in 1994. As a direct result, in 1995 the church laid off many of its headquarters staff, cut circulation of its flagship *Plain Truth* magazine, ended the prestigious performing arts series at its acclaimed Ambassador Auditorium, sharply reduced subsidies to Ambassador University, and sold off assets including a fleet of vehicles (among them Tkach's private jet and limousine).

Church officials expected 53,000 to take part in the 1995 Feast of Tabernacles, compared to previous attendance of 83,000.

"I don't feel they're making those changes to make more to become more popular," said John Trechak, editor and publisher of *Ambassador Report*, a newsletter heavily critical of the WCG. "I think it's amazing that any religious organization would be willing to take hits to its income and risk the livelihood of its leaders."

"We think it's finally bottomed out," said Joseph Tkach, Jr., now Pastor General of the WCG. "We think we've won the war, but there's a cleanup operation taking place."

What Happened? WCG leaders say the many changes did not stem from a long-time desire for theological reform or from consultations with evangelical theologians.

"We've been accused of hiring consultants to bring about changes, but that is not true. Like Paul, we did not consult with flesh and blood. We believe that what has happened in our fellowship is the work of the Holy Spirit," said Greg Albrecht, editor of *The P1ain Truth*.

"We resisted what we called 'the pagan Trinity doctrine.' Believe me, there was no desire for reform. But the Holy Spirit brought us to a place of repentance for exclusivism and pride," Albrecht said.

"We grew up in this fellowship," reflects Tkach. "Growing up with these teachings, it wasn't an easy thing to shed them."

Albrecht said that as WCG leaders moved toward their changes they received moral support from such influential evangelicals as missiologist Ruth Tucker of Trinity International University, David Neff of *Christianity Today* magazine (himself a former Seventh-day Adventist minister), and Christian Research Institute president Hank Hanegraaff.

Tkach compares the WCG's changes to emerging from years spent in a theological cave. "When we came out of the cave, what we found was some of the cult-watching groups made the journey ten times more difficult," Tkach said. "Hank was one who was not that way. Hank was gracious. Hank welcomed us. Hank encouraged us."

Reflects Hanegraaff: "This is unprecedented in church history. It's the very kind of thing that those who have given their lives in ministry to the kingdom of the cults hope for. Rather than developing hurdles for these guys to jump over, our job is to facilitate the process, recognizing they had an enormous tactical problem in winning over their own members. They don't want to galvanize people around Garner Ted Armstrong or other splinter groups."

"Many other Sabbatarian groups have looked to what the Worldwide Church of God has done and said, 'How did you do this? How do we do this?' They're charting brand-new territory."

Evangelical Responses. Tucker speaks warmly of her friends in the WCG leadership. “I’ve always appreciated their openness and their honesty. I never once caught them misrepresenting anything to me.” Does she consider the WCG an orthodox Christian denomination? “Absolutely. Categorically. I would sign my name on the dotted line,” she told the JOURNAL. “I’m not saying they necessarily have the right take on the Old Testament feasts or eternal punishment, but their thinking is much clearer on salvation by grace and on the Trinity.”

Nor does Tucker believe the Worldwide Church of God should change its name, although it’s very different from the WCG of Herbert Armstrong.

“Let this go down forever in history, that a movement outside orthodoxy can turn to God, turn to truth, and hold its name high,” Tucker said. “As a church historian, I cannot cite anything else like this.”

Philip Arnn of Watchman Fellowship has been more skeptical of the WCG’s changes, but he too believes the denomination has made significant progress.

“The doctrinal changes are extraordinary. On all the cardinal doctrines — the nature of God, soteriology, the identity of the body of Christ — they are now orthodox....As for the internal environment of the group, they still have a lot of work to do. They still have to deal with Herbert Armstrong. They have covered up a lot of what he stood for,” Arnn said.

“They have to address the errors of Armstrong. They have to apologize to the people whose lives they have destroyed over the years. People have died because of this organization,” he added, referring to the WCG’s former ban on consulting physicians.

“Families have been destroyed because of this organization,” Arnn said, with special reference to the church’s one-time prohibition of remarriage after divorce, regardless of circumstances — a teaching that has also been revised.

Armstrong’s Ghost. Recent WCG promotional literature still treats Armstrong reverently. “From the humble beginnings in Oregon to an international work, Mr. Armstrong never forgot that it was not his efforts, but the power of the Spirit of God, that built the Church. Mr. Armstrong always thought of himself merely as an instrument in God’s hands,” says *Welcome to Our Fellowship*, a WCG brochure.

“Mr. Armstrong constantly encouraged members of the Worldwide Church of God to grow in the grace and knowledge of Christ — to always be willing to change when God showed the way. The Church of God, he frequently observed, must be willing to admit error and to have the courage to change.”

Feazell explains that the WCG wants to help those members who still believe Armstrong was a man of God with a prophetic message, and compares the Armstrong legacy to growing up with an alcoholic father. “I can love him, and God wants me to respect him as my father. That doesn’t mean I have to respect everything about his life.”

“We want to find the right balance between explaining that he taught things we do not believe, but not pretending that he’s not part of our history. We’re trying to be sensitive, and yet clear and honest at the same time.”

Observers such as Arnn express concern that the WCG hasn’t been willing to admit error with sufficient clarity or timeliness. “What we were hearing for years was that what was coming out in print was not being conveyed to people in the field,” he said. “We thought they were making changes, but they were more cosmetic. We thought they were still exercising cultic control.

“I’ll tell you what I don’t understand: why they don’t utilize the resources of the church? All of last year, I was waiting for them to start sending out mandated videos” about doctrinal changes, he said.

“The first time they used [them] was in January [of 1995], and utter chaos broke loose,” he claimed. “They should have been taking one doctrinal issue at a time, instead of blowing the whole church apart.”

CRI’s Hanegraaff bristles at suggestions that the WCG hasn’t moved quickly enough to correct its course. “It’s almost laughable that someone talks about speed when you think of what’s happened in the last 10 years.”

Moving On. Bryan Kritzell worked at WCG headquarters for nine years but left the denomination in late 1994 to attend Lake Avenue Congregational Church in Pasadena.

Kritzell, who joined the WCG in 1982, said he supported the doctrinal changes implemented by Tkach and Feazell but grew tired of the turmoil they brought, asking himself: “Why should I put up with this for 10 to 15 years when I can go worship?”

During the Tkach years, Kritzell said, he hoped the WCG would become more open to newcomers. “It was evident that they saw more people as bringing more problems,” he said. “But maybe they had a point. You can’t very well bring people into a body that is broken and dysfunctional.”

Kritzell believes the WCG should bring in outside consultants to help it through these years of theological and cultural transition.

“Instead, they just lob these grenades [at former doctrines]. The result is, they just bungle through everything. They really need some outside help,” he said.

While a WCG member, Kritzell also sensed a slowness in the leaders about acknowledging legitimate Christianity outside the movement’s own circles.

“Even though people say things in their mind, it doesn’t necessarily click in their heart,” he said. “Even though they wouldn’t say ‘You’re very bad for going to Lake [Avenue Congregational],’ in the minds of many people at Worldwide, I *am* bad for going to Lake.



"I know that when we were telling people we were only a drop in the bucket [of Christian churches], Tkach [Sr.] told me himself that, well, 'There are a few other Christians, but we're the main thing.'"

"We've still got evangelists over there [in the WCG] who can't say 'Jesus.' They have to say 'Christ' or 'Jesus Christ,' because 'Jesus' is too Protestant," Kritzell added.

Ambassador Report's John Trechak, another former WCG employee, agrees that the WCG has made many important changes in recent years. "I wouldn't want to call them evangelical just yet, but they're almost there," he said, adding that he now categorizes the denomination as a moderately abusive Christian sect."

And although Trechak gives the WCG leadership credit for making "some very big improvements," he still worries about how many former WCG members find their way to splinter churches that uphold many or most of the tenets of traditional Armstrongism. "It's almost as if the more the Tkach organization gave the members a taste of the freedom to be found in Christ, the more they rejected it," he observed.

The Future WCG. As the Worldwide Church of God jettisons so much of Herbert Armstrong's teachings, will anything remain of its historical legacy? *Should* anything remain of it?

Tucker believes WCG can remain unique as an orthodox Christian church that chooses to worship on Saturday instead of Sunday. WCG's celebration of the Feast of Tabernacles could enhance evangelical culture.

"This has to be a two-way exchange. I hope we'll find evangelical leaders saying, 'Welcome into the family of God.'...I allow them to challenge me as well. I hope evangelicals will allow themselves to be challenged by the courage, the incredible courage, of these leaders."

"If evangelicals want a good Christian magazine to read, then for heaven's sake they should get *The Plain Truth*," Tucker said. (The WCG still sends *The Plain Truth* and its other literature free to anyone who requests them.)

Arnn agrees that the feasts could remain as legitimate celebrations for the increasingly orthodox WCG. "I think a Christian church can observe the feasts, as long as they don't work a hardship on the membership, and as long as they are clothed in an understanding of how Christ has fulfilled the feasts," he said.

"We don't have a problem with Saturday worship any more than with Thursday worship. It's a nonissue, so long as it doesn't become a requirement for justification."

Arnn also believes that WCG members can model a personal quest for holiness, "so long as it doesn't become a semi-Pelagian works-righteousness."

Lending Support. Might evangelicals now consider joining WCG congregations to help them along the path to full fellowship with other believers?

Tucker believes that some could make the move comfortably. “I hear incredible reports of warm evangelical faith in Worldwide Church of God congregations.”

Kritzell disagrees. “I would not recommend that people go to Worldwide while they’re still working on their internal problems,” he said. “I was so starved for worship that we could not keep from crying in our first visits to Lake Avenue Congregational Church.”

Arnn said he would not recommend such involvement yet, because of the confusion circulating among WCG members who either do not understand the doctrinal shifts or reject them outright.

“To walk into that kind of confusion is not going to be edifying to somebody from the outside,” Arnn said, adding that “the Worldwide Church of God people need contact with the outside Christian community. They need to be able to discuss issues with people outside of the Worldwide Church of God.”

A New Welcome. Unlike the days of Herbert Armstrong, the doors of most WCG churches are now open to visitors, and WCG leaders are thinking about what they can contribute to their newly discovered Christian brothers and sisters in other churches.

“The greatest emphasis will be that Jesus Christ is Lord and that we are saved by the grace of God through faith in him. There was only the slightest whiff of that teaching before,” said Feazell.

Even though the WCG will retain its festival observances, “We have completely transformed the reason we meet on those days,” he said. “We use those days, not as a commanded assembly, but as an opportunity for Christians to gather and commemorate the work of Jesus.

“Time will tell whether God has something unique for us to do. If it’s God’s will, we may be able to tell a story about legalism, authoritarianism, theological error, and the feeling that you’re the only true church. We’ve had to repent of that,” Feazell explained. “We feel a keen sense of the danger, the damage and the harm in trying to hold one’s church out as the most superior form.”

