

Worldwide Church of God

Are We There Yet?

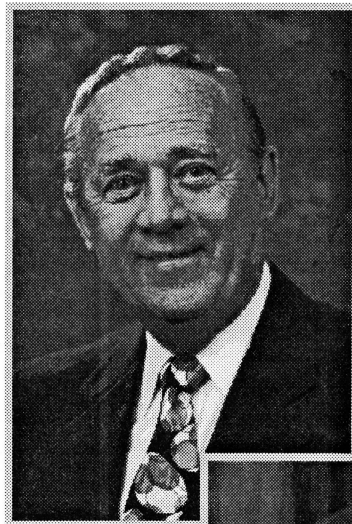
By Phillip Arnn

On 23 September, 1995 Joseph W. Tkach, the controversial head of the Worldwide Church of God died from complications with his battle with cancer. Tkach will be noted by religious historians as the only man in his century to lead a major heretical sect into the diverse mainstream of the Christian community. Historians will note the changes made by Tkach, but will they look in detail at the means by which the changes were brought about?

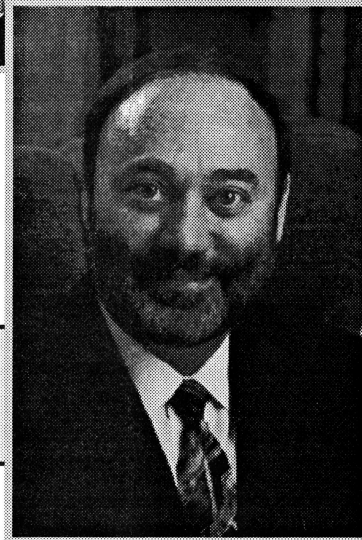
Joseph Tkach assumed the position of Pastor General of the Worldwide Church of God in 1986, at the death of church

Joe Tkach, the current Pastor General, continues with the transformation.

founder Herbert W. Armstrong. For fifty years the Worldwide Church of God (WCG) had been marked as a cult by the Christian community. In the early days of Tkach's administration he gave no clue of deviation from Armstrongism. Tkach mirrored and extolled the beliefs and ministry of his predecessor. In the church's members-only newspaper, *The Worldwide News (WN)*, of 25 August 1986, Tkach placed in print "18 truths" which God had *restored* to the church through Armstrong. He even strongly implied that Armstrong was the Elijah that was to come and restore all things in the last days as prophesied by Jesus in Matt. 17:11.



Joseph W. Tkach Sr., successor to church founder Herbert W. Armstrong.



At the time Tkach became the head of the church, many ministers had assumed oppressive control over the member's lives. Armstrong had taught that the WCG was God's government on earth and the only place of salvation (*Dear Brethren*, 2 May 1974). The ministers proclaimed that they were God's representatives and were to be obeyed without question (R. C. Meredith, *Good News [GN]*, September 1955, p. 2). To do this could result in the offender being disfellowshipped and marked by the minister. In the mind of the member this meant spiritual death.

Initial Changes

The first hint of a change in attitude appeared in Tkach's early letters to ministers, which accompanied the semi-monthly minister's bulletin, the *Pastor General's Report (PGR)*. He admon-

ished the ministers to take a less invasive role in counseling with members. In later PGRs he encouraged the ministers to view their function as that of a shepherd and not a sheriff. However, the admonitions to the ministers concerning authoritarian practices were, for the most part, unheeded. The abuses continued throughout Tkach's tenure as Pastor General.

Armstrong's system of theology supported authoritarian abuse. Whatever his initial motivation may have been, Tkach set about to rebuild the foundation. Doctrinal changes began as early as 1988. That spring, he revised the Armstrong doctrine against medical treatment, stating, "...as the end of his life drew near, Mr. Armstrong made it clear to me that he now questioned his understanding on the use of the medical profession...it was left to me to correct the misunderstanding" (Tkach, "Personal," *WN*, 14 March 1988, p. 1).

Tkach also amended the mission of the church. Armstrong had taught that the church existed for his support, as God's end-time apostle proclaiming the soon coming Kingdom of God. In the 8 August 1988 issue of *WN*, Tkach emphasized Matthew 28 as the biblical commission for the church.

Other Armstrong doctrines began to tumble. In December of 1990 a church spokesman stated in a radio interview that the WCG was not the exclusive body of believers (taped interview on file). Armstrong's teaching that God was "a family" into which WCG members would enter at their resurrection as God-Beings was repudiated (*Truths That Transform*, 20 October 1990, tape on file). In the summer of 1993, the Tkach administration announced that the WCG had come to understand that the nature of God could best be understood as a "form of the Trinity" (Pasadena headquarters, Personal Correspondence Dept. letters).

Adopting the Gospel

The church's definition of the *gospel* was changed. Armstrong's gospel was the message of the soon coming Kingdom of God on earth, of which the WCG was the present representative. In a *Co-Worker's* letter dated 24 October, 1991 Tkach announced that the gospel was the message "...of God concerning his Son Jesus Christ (Romans 1:1-3), the gospel that Christ died for our sins, was buried, and was raised on the third day (I Corinthians 15:1-4)."

Also, in 1991, Tkach changed the church's teaching on the time eternal life is secured. Armstrong had taught that the Christian is only a spiritual fetus subject to abortion if he did not follow all that Armstrong interpreted as God's Law. Eternal life (being born again) was secured at the resurrection. Tkach explained that this teaching was in error and eternal life was a present possession of the believer ("Personal," *WN*, 28 January 1991).

The final corrective steps in doctrinal revision to bring the church's major teachings in line with scripture came in December of 1994 in a sermon given in Atlanta. Tkach stated, "We cannot assume that any part of the Old Covenant is binding on us today simply on the basis of it being the old package of

laws." Tkach also included Protestants among those whom God had called to salvation, overturning the idea that only Sabbath-keepers were true Christians. The same sermon was repeated in Big Sandy, Texas, a week later, and the video tape was mandated to be shown in all churches worldwide in January, 1995.

Tkach's Legacy

Joseph Tkach's decisions affected tens of thousands of lives. Like the enlightened despots of past empires, he used his authority to bring about change for the good of the people under his care. However, his administration was a confusion of mixed signals. Though trained in the Armstrong school of totalitarian

Watchman Fellowship asked a WCG executive the reason for not using mandated showing of video teachings in all WCG churches worldwide to explain changes in teachings as they occurred through the years. The reply was, "You had an advantage as an outside observer. We simply never thought of it."

It seems likely that political expediency, egotism and honest men with more zeal than wisdom also figured in the methodology employed to bring the Worldwide Church of God into orthodox scriptural understanding. That move has been historic and unprecedented, but not without its own tragic consequences. Years of confusion have produced profound distrust, and left many people and families scarred or broken. Today, WCG

leaders still labor under the suspicion of many in the church that they are being duplicitous.

There have been other repercussions. Within the first six months of 1995, one third of the WCG ministers in the United States had been terminated or had resigned. The ministers, trained

under Armstrong, refused to accept teachings that they had been taught were Satan's deceptions. At the same time, a large number of members left the church. The exodus of church members over the past five years may be as high as 40 percent. Tragically, approximately half that number have joined splinter groups which hold to various teachings of Armstrong.

The Process of Change

In retrospect, it seems that Tkach and his staff were studying and rethinking their personal Bible understanding through the years. Several doctrines went through an evolutionary process. One example was the change in the understanding of the nature of God. There was a measurable evolution in the thinking of Michael Feazell, Tkach's executive assistant, and others involved in the theological think tank on this issue. The *GN* magazine for December 1990 stated



Pastor General's Report

Limited-Circulation Newspaper for the Ministers of the Worldwide Church of God

January 5, 1995

Dear Ministers,

Now that Christ has led us to understand and believe that the new covenant in his shed blood has made the old covenant obsolete, not only is there cause for great rejoicing in the truth of the gospel message, but there are certain procedural matters that need clarification.

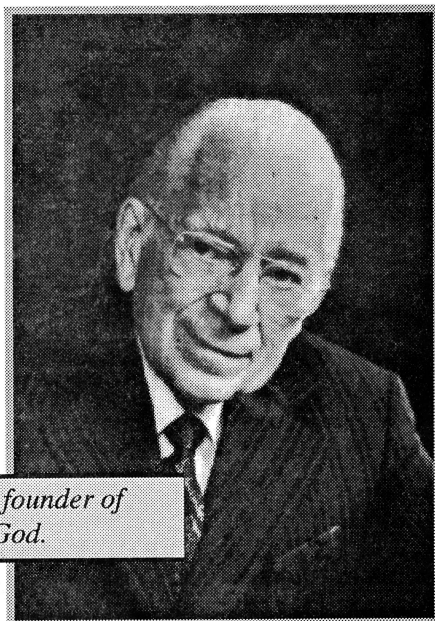
The PGR notified ministers of the changes well in advance of the general membership.

rule, he had come to recognize the abuses. As Pastor General he asked his ministers to be less authoritarian, yet upheld their abusive actions when a member had the courage to appeal to headquarters for arbitration. On doctrinal issues, Tkach would write about New Testament justification by faith, then give contradictory sermons which preached Old Testament "works" salvation.

It appears that Joseph Tkach was the elder brother trying to lead his siblings away from the pain of the past while continuing to honor the parent who abused them. He dismantled Armstrong's teachings but kept Armstrong's form of government, which he used to enforce the changes. It is obvious that Joseph Tkach intended to transform the Worldwide Church of God. What is not obvious to the outside observer is why the process was approached in such a haphazard fashion.

that the Trinity doctrine was satanic. In March of 1991, the WCG informed Watchman Fellowship that the *GN* article of the previous December was null and void and no longer represented the teaching of the church.

That same year WCG representatives made several statements affirming the divinity of the Holy Spirit and the oneness of God. WCG representatives met with Kurt Van Gorden of Jude 3 Ministries and Dr. Alan Gomes of Talbot School of Theology in January of 1992. In response to a qualifying in-



Herbert W. Armstrong, deceased founder of the Worldwide Church of God.

quiry as to the personality of the Holy Spirit, Michael Feazell stated that the church was not ready to accept that position. He did comment that the subject was still open for further study (*Winds of Change in the Worldwide Church of God*, Alan W. Gomes, Ph.D., 1993). The following year the church accepted the Trinity doctrine in three articles written by Tkach in the *WN*.

Abuses Not All Ended

The attitude that God's government resides among the ruling elite is still evident, from the top down to the local ministers. For example, a member in the Philadelphia, Pennsylvania church was recently suspended for sharing tapes of former minister Earl Williams with a fellow church member. The suspended member was told he "had a government problem." Also, the official church position that there are Christians in all professing Christian churches was minimized by an Ohio minister. Just before the fall feast, he told his congregation "there are very, very few true Christians in the (other) churches." These are only a sampling of reports received by Watchman Fellowship.

Members who have complained about remaining Old Testament language and practices are not encouraged by responses from headquarters. The members are told the Old Testament is not binding, and yet Holy Days and Saturday worship with their sixty years of doctrinal baggage are still observed.

Tithing is enforced on church employees and members are shamed into maintaining a tithe as a minimum in giving. This practice is not unique to the WCG but has become a point of contention with many church members.

There are many in the church who are comfortable with keeping the Sabbath and Holy Days. They still believe these practices are God's commandments and are to be kept for that reason. The "New Covenant" believers in the church feel the administration should abandon the Sabbatarian economy, feeling it is hypocritical and regressive. It appears to be a lose/lose situation for the leadership in Pasadena.

Facing the Past

Today the people of the Worldwide Church of God are in need of healing. They are weary in soul and spirit. The larger Christian body may be able to help, but ultimately that healing must come from within their own ranks, their own spiritual family. Many current and former members are facing the reality of the abuse they have inflicted on each other and have allowed to be inflicted upon themselves. The WCG is a dysfunctional family that is trying to move forward under the burden of the betrayal of trust that is the pain of the past.

The administration acknowledges that there were mistakes made in the past. In the PGR for 13 November, 1995 Joe Tkach (Jr.) stated, "It is my painful

responsibility to acknowledge that the Worldwide Church of God has been among the offenders.... As we look back, we ask ourselves how we could have been so wrong. Our hearts go out to all whom our teachings have misled in the Scriptures. We don't minimize their spiritual disorientation and confusion. We earnestly desire their understanding and forgiveness." (see also, "Personal," *Plain Truth* (PT), March 1996)

Where From Here?

Many of the members are wrestling with the question of whether to stay in the church. All that made it distinctive and set it apart as the "one and only..." is gone. They must find a new identity. Joseph Tkach Sr. should be credited for leading them away from attempting "to relate to God through old covenant rules and regulations..." as Joe Tkach (Jr.) reflected in a recent *PT*, and for extolling Jesus Christ. It is in Jesus that the individual can find not only identity but rest for a weary soul. Jesus said, "Come unto me all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart, and ye shall find rest unto your souls" (Matt. 11:28-29).

The traumatic events of the past several years have raised a number of important questions which remain to be resolved in the minds of many members and anyone involved in an abusive church. What is the *Church*? To what extent can church leaders claim to speak and act for God? Do church leaders have more of God's Spirit than members? Does a good end justify questionable means? These are questions that every member of the Worldwide Church of God should seek to answer from the wisdom of hindsight and an unbiased re-examination of the Word of God. ✠