

Watchman Fellowship Profile

The Worldwide Church of God

By Phillip Arnn

Founder: Herbert W. Armstrong

Founding Date: January, 1934

Publications: *The Plain Truth*, *Worldwide News* (members only newspaper), *Youth*.

Organizational Structure: Church government is from the top down. The Pastor General heads the church. Evangelists oversee department heads. Regional Pastors oversee the ministers in local churches. Ministers are assisted by elders and deacons.

Unique Terms: The Work, God's Church, God's command, overcoming. These words represent decades of teaching to the members.

Other Names: WCG, originally called The Radio Church of God or Armstrongism.

HISTORY

Herbert W. Armstrong was born in 1892 in Des Moines, Iowa, into a Quaker family. In 1917, Armstrong was married to Loma Dillon. In 1927 Loma Armstrong became acquainted with the teachings of the Church of God-7th Day while they were living in Oregon. This was Armstrong's introduction to the Sabbatarian movement. The Church of God-7th Day split in 1933 and Armstrong was ordained a minister in the Church of God-7th Day which set up headquarters in Salem, West Virginia.

In 1934, Armstrong bought radio time and began The Radio Church of God. He also published his first mimeographed issue of *The Plain Truth* magazine. He was the minister of the COG-7th Day church in Eugene, Oregon at that time. In 1938, Armstrong was stripped of his COG-7th Day ministerial license. Armstrong had been teaching that the Jewish Feast days were binding on the church contrary to COG-7th Day doctrine. Armstrong retained his Eugene church and his radio ministry.

In the years during the war, Armstrong taught that Armageddon was just around the corner. He taught that Mussolini and later Hitler were both the antichrist. He made many specific false prophecies (see **Worldwide Church of God: Living Under the Law** in Resource section for documentation).

In 1947, he relocated the ministry to Pasadena, California. He began Ambassador College, a bible school to train ministers who would raise up churches under his leadership. In 1968, the name of the organization was changed to The Worldwide Church of God.

There was a split in the church in 1974, when forty ministers and several thousand members left the church because of doctrinal disputes and resulting abuses.

Armstrong disfellowshipped his son, Garner Ted, in 1978. Garner Ted formed his own church, The Church of God, International located in Tyler, Texas. By the mid-seventies, Armstrong was proclaiming himself God's apostle for the last days. In 1979, the state of California placed the church in receivership under allegations of financial abuses by church leaders. After lengthy court battles the courts removed the church from receivership.

Herbert Armstrong died in January 1986 at the age of 94. He was succeeded by Joseph W. Tkach as Pastor General.

In the years since Tkach has taken over leadership, there have been many changes in doctrine in the Worldwide Church of God. There has been encouraging evidence that the church is moving toward an orthodox position on many major doctrines. For the first time the church headquarters recently espoused a Trinitarian view of God. The church has also begun to make statements promoting the traditional Christian doctrine of salvation by grace through faith rather than by good works and law keeping as taught under Armstrong.

The ongoing nature of the changes and the speed at which they have been (and are) happening make it difficult to specify the church's current doctrines. Published statements from church leaders sometimes raise as many questions as they answer. The doctrinal changes have been extensive and serious enough to cause a theological crisis within the organization. There is great resistance to Tkach's new doctrinal direction by a significant number of local and regional leaders and members. In some cases, dissenters preferring the old doctrines have left to form their own rival churches or joined older break-offs formed during Armstrong's administration. In many cases ministers and elders simply refuse to teach the new doctrine causing considerable confusion among the members.

DOCTRINES

In the August 25, 1986 issue of *The Worldwide News*, appeared the article, "God Restored These 18 Truths: How Thankful Are You For Them?" The article stated that, "The Editorial Services staff has compiled here, for the first time in any of the Church's publications, 18 essential, basic truths that God restored to His Church through Herbert W. Armstrong." In less than a decade after that article was written, most of those "Truths" have been abandoned by the church under the leadership of Joseph W. Tkach.

The doctrinal foundation of the Worldwide Church of God was adopted from the Seventh-Day Adventists through the Church of God-7th Day. Armstrong added the Identity of Modern Israel theory which he got from J. H. Allen and the Jewish Feast Days, church eras, and the "true name" of God's church which he picked up from G.G. Rupert (Address at a local elders' conference at Big Sandy, Texas by Tkach, Jr., June 1994).

GOD (under Armstrong) — "The Hebrew for God is *Elohim*, a uniplural noun, such as the words *family*, *church*, *group*... And so, in truth, God is not merely one person-age or even limited to a 'Trinity,' but is a family" (*The Good News*, February, 1979, p. 1). "The doctrine of the Trinity is false... *Elohim* is the divine family-only one family, but more than one divine Person... So the eternal Father is a Person, and is God. Jesus Christ is a different *Person*-and is God. They are two separate and individual Persons..." (**The Missing Dimension In Sex**, p. 32).

GOD (under Tkach) — “Do let me summarize, and I hope to make this crystal clear. Our old literature taught that there are two god beings in one God Family, each composed of Holy Spirit. That teaching, which implied that there are two Gods, is not biblical. The Bible teaches that there is one God, not two. “The Bible does not teach that God is a family name, with two God Beings in that family right now, and billions to come later. The Bible teaches that the one and same God is Father, Son, and Holy spirit” (*Pastor General’s Report*, July, 27, 1993 p.4).

JESUS (under Armstrong) — “Christ is the Yahweh of the Old Testament” (*The Plain Truth*, Jan., 1955, p.7). “Hence, we see that He was not the ‘Son’ of God until He was born of the virgin Mary” (*The Plain Truth*, July/August, 1955, p. 4). “The Satan inspired doctrine that Jesus was not human that He did not inherit the sinful nature of Adam, that He did not have all the normal human passions and weaknesses against which all of us have to struggle...*this is the doctrine of the antichrist*” (*ibid.*). “Now notice carefully God the Father did not cause Jesus Christ to get back into the body which had died” (*The Plain Truth*, April, 1963, p. 10).

JESUS (under Tkach) — “Was Jesus the God of the Old Testament? Since God is one, what is the point of asking who the God of the Old Testament was? The answer... has to be ‘The one and only true God. Who else?’” (*Review on the Nature of God*, p.5). “The Son of God is one of the three hypostases of the one God. Therefore, the Son of God hypostasis is eternal” (*Pastor General Report*, Oct. 1993). “From God’s standpoint, there was no possibility that Christ might sin,...” (*Pastor General Report*, Jan. 22, 1991). “Jesus Christ clearly showed to his disciples that after his resurrection, he still had the body he had before his death” (*The Plain Truth*, April 1994, p.19).

SALVATION (under Armstrong) — “We are saved by GRACE, and through faith—make no mistake about that; but—*there are conditions!* ... People have been taught, falsely, that ‘Christ *completed* the Plan of Salvation on the Cross’ -when actually it was only *begun* there. The popular denominations have taught, ‘Just BELIEVE—that’s all there is to it; believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you are that instant *saved!*’ That teaching is false!” (**All About Water Baptism**, p. 2, 1954 edition). “...Jesus gave them the final GOSPEL COMMISSION... He commanded baptism as an obligatory ordinance for this Gospel dispensation: ...it is ‘he that is baptized’ that shall be saved. It’s part of the divine Commission—a required ordinance for salvation!” (*ibid.*, p. 5). “Now water baptism is a required CONDITION to receive the Holy Spirit” (*ibid.*, p.8). “But now see how God’s Spirit entering and dwelling in one compares to the physical sperm impregnating the ovum - the imparting of eternal SPIRIT life, later to produce... a SPIRIT PERSON!... Life from the Father has been imparted to it... but neither embryo nor fetus is YET a born person. In the same manner the Spirit-begotten human is not, yet, a SPIRIT PERSON...” (**Just What Do You Mean... BORN AGAIN**, p. 17, 1972 ed.). (meaning not yet born again).

Armstrong taught that a believer could lose salvation by disobeying what Armstrong declared to be “God’s command through His chosen Apostle.” He wrote, “Do you want to let resentment against God’s government over you NOW disqualify you - snatch you from God’s GRACE and PURPOSE for you, and cast you into a lake of fire?” (*Dear Brethren Letter*, May 2, 1974 p. 7).

SALVATION (under Tkach) — “The gospel of the Kingdom of God is the gospel of salvation in Jesus Christ” (*The Worldwide News*, Aug. 11, 1992, p. 4). “Our hope of the future, the time when we will receive the fullness of our inheritance, is made all the *more real* to us as we truly enter into and participate in the new life to which God has called us in Christ *right now*” (*The Worldwide News*, Oct. 6, 1992, p. 1). “...forgiveness is not a result of baptism. Jesus forgave sins without having to perform a baptism. So when does a believer receive the Holy Spirit? When a person believes, he or she is ‘in Christ,’ sealed with the Holy Spirit” (*Reviews You Can Use*, Nov./Dec., 1993, pp. 21, 22).

Tkach has taught that believers can lose their salvation by not being overcomers. "Salvation is one thing but overcoming is another. And if we are not interested in overcoming, you can rest assured that salvation is not going to be there. Salvation is a present possession. However, it does not mean once saved always saved in any way, shape or form. You have to overcome and endure to the end" (Joseph Tkach Sr., Feast of Tabernacles, Sept. 30. 1993).

"If the Christian remains faithful and does not turn away from God, his salvation remains firm and secure. In that sense, 'once saved always saved' is right" (*Pastor General Report*, May 15, 1990).

The two statements above do little to clear the muddy waters of doctrinal confusion they create. It would appear that the two factors that determine the state of justification for a member of the WCG are obedience and overcoming. However, Tkach spoke to a large gathering of WCG ministers and members in Atlanta, Ga. on December 17, 1994. He addressed the issue of tithing as being an Old Testament requirement which no longer applies to Christians. He stated that free will offerings were the New Covenant way to give. One week later, in Big Sandy, Texas, Tkach announced that it is alright to work on the Sabbath for a brief period of time. Both of these doctrines were previously believed to be requirements which could effect one's salvation.

The WCG under Tkach is continuing to refine its doctrinal positions. The official acceptance of a "form of the Trinity" and the recent statements leading away from performance salvation are exciting developments. The downside is that the majority of Regional and local ministers have not accepted the changes and are not teaching them to their congregations. According to numerous widespread reports received by Watchman Fellowship, authoritarian abuses of members on a local level are still epidemic and present a serious challenge to Tkach and his administration.

RESOURCES

Worldwide Church of God: Living Under the Law: Phillip Arnn. This documentation manual and cassette demonstrate Armstrong's false prophecies for the end of the world and document doctrinal changes through the 1970's. \$8.

Worldwide Church of God: A Broken Wineskin: Phillip Arnn. This manual and cassette compare the teachings of Armstrong and Tkach on; God's Government, the Gospel, God Is..., and Born Again. There is also documentation illustrating Armstrong's plagiarism of J. H. Allen's **Judah's Scepter and Joseph's Birthright** which was the basis for Armstrong's **US&BC in Prophecy**. \$8.

Sabbath In Crisis. Dale Ratzlaff. This book deals with the Sabbath question in exhaustive detail. Must reading for anyone interested in this issue as it pertains to New Testament believers. 345 pages. \$15.

Herbert Armstrong's Tangled Web. David Robinson. An insiders's view of Armstrong and his ministry. It covers the struggle for and the abuse of power at Headquarters during the turbulent 1970's. From "Ted's problem" and ouster; to Herbert Armstrong's "darkest secret," the book is engaging reading and provides an historical perspective of the church's past problems and doctrinal changes. 284 pages. \$10.



PROFILE is a regular feature of the Watchman Expositor published by Watchman Fellowship, Inc. Readers are encouraged to begin their own religious research notebooks using these monthly articles. In the future, back issues of PROFILE will be made available at a nominal fee. Resource items are subject to changes in availability and price. Readers requesting materials may use the enclosed envelope or send their requests to the address printed on the back cover of the Expositor. Please include 15% additional to help with postage and handling. All rights reserved ©1995.