

## Armstrongism

By Phillip Arnn<sup>1</sup>

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**Founder:** Herbert W. Armstrong

**Date:** 1934

**Publications:** *The Finished Mystery*, *The Missing Dimension in Sex*, *Mystery of the Ages*, *The United States and Great Britain in Prophecy*, numerous other books and booklets.

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

### HISTORY

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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 that 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 failed predictions.<sup>2</sup>

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.

In 1972 Herbert Armstrong suspended his son Garner Ted from his ministerial duties for "personal and emotional problems."<sup>3</sup> There was a split in the church in 1974 resulting from disagreement with the WCG centralized structure versus local autonomy. Forty ministers and several thousand members left the church over this dispute and attendant doctrinal matters as well as failed prophetic interpretations.<sup>4</sup> Armstrong eventually disfellowshipped his son in 1978. Garner Ted formed his own church, The Church of God, International located in Tyler, Texas.<sup>5</sup> In 1998 The Church of God, International ousted Garner Ted for reasons of moral failure.<sup>6</sup> He then formed another church, The Intercontinental Church of God that he led until his death in 2003.<sup>7</sup>

By the mid-seventies, Herbert Armstrong was receiving the title of "God's Apostle" for the last days.<sup>8</sup> He was openly calling himself "Christ's Apostle" by the late 1970s.<sup>9</sup> In 1979, the state of California placed the church in receivership under allegations of financial abuses by church leaders.<sup>10</sup> After lengthy court battles in which the church was

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exonerated of any financial wrongdoing, the courts removed the church from receivership. The courts may have found the leadership of the church innocent of illegal activities, however the extravagant lifestyles of those in leadership were a stark contrast to the poverty of many of the members who gave sacrificially.<sup>11</sup>

Herbert Armstrong died in January 1986 at the age of 94. Joseph W. Tkach Sr. succeeded him as Pastor General. Beginning in the late 1980s Tkach Sr. began a series of doctrinal changes that transformed the WCG from an aberrant expression of Christianity into an evangelical denomination. In the early 1990s they adopted a Trinitarian view of God.<sup>12</sup> In 1995, Tkach Sr. gave two major sermons to the churches in which he repudiated those teachings of Herbert W. Armstrong that were deemed to be heretical by Evangelical Christians.<sup>13</sup>

This action led to the largest split in the group's history. Hundreds of ministers and tens of thousands of members left to join several hundred Armstrong devoted groups. Some of the most influential of these are; The United Church of God, Cincinnati, founded in 1995; The Church of God, International, founded in 1978; The Living Church of God directed by Roderick C. Meredith, founded in 1998; The Philadelphia Church of God directed by Gerald Flurry, founded in 1989.<sup>14</sup>

Tkach Sr. died in September 1995 and was succeeded by his son, Joseph Tkach, Jr. who continued to reevaluate and adjust key teachings in the movement. Under the leadership of the Tkaches, the Worldwide Church of God has abandoned Armstrongism.

The Worldwide Church of God now promotes the traditional Christian doctrine, including salvation by grace through faith rather than by good works and law keeping as taught under Armstrong. The Worldwide Church of God has made a remarkable transformation to orthodoxy. They are now members of the National Association of Evangelicals (<http://www.nae.net>) and Evangelical Ministries to New Religions (<http://www.emnr.org>).

## DOCTRINES

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**God:** "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 personage or even limited to a 'Trinity,' but is a family."<sup>15</sup> "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."<sup>16</sup> "The Father and the Son who are already composed of spirit, have definite shape. Whatever holds its shape we call solid.... The Father and the Son each have a head, hair, eyes, nose, mouth, arms, fingers, a torso, legs, feet, plus inward parts.... Living matter reproduces itself — so does spirit. That is why God is reproducing after *HIS* own kind."<sup>17</sup>

**Jesus:** "Christ is the Yahweh of the Old Testament,"<sup>18</sup> "Hence, we see that He was not the 'Son' of God until He was born of the Virgin Mary."<sup>19</sup> "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*."<sup>20</sup> "Now notice carefully God the Father did not cause Jesus Christ to get back into the body which had died."<sup>21</sup>

**Holy Spirit:** "The Holy Spirit is the *impersonal power* of God.... Every work of God is accomplished through this great power."<sup>22</sup> "The Holy Spirit also belongs to the God family. It is the essence or power of God.... the Holy Spirit then is the power of God which emanates from God."<sup>23</sup> The majority of the scriptures connected with it [the Holy Spirit] show that it is *not someone*, but something. Even the personification of the Spirit is no proof of its personality."<sup>24</sup>

**Salvation:** “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!”<sup>25</sup> “ 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.”<sup>26</sup> “Now water baptism is a required CONDITION to receive the Holy Spirit...”<sup>27</sup> “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...” meaning not yet born again.<sup>28</sup> 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?”<sup>29</sup>

## BIBLICAL RESPONSE

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**God:** Armstrong’s denial of the Trinity placed him and his church in a worldview that was foreign to that of historical, conservative Christianity. He taught polytheism, the belief in many gods. The Father and Jesus were two separate gods. The members of the Worldwide Church of God were told that at the resurrection they too would become member of the God Family and thus gods.<sup>30</sup>

In John, 1:1-3, 14, and 18, John declares, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. An amplified translation from the Greek into English may be read as, “When God (the Father) began to create, the Word was already eternally present, and the Word was in intimate face-to-face communion with the Father, and the Word is, in his nature, God.”<sup>31</sup> In verse 14, John calls Jesus the *monogenous, only one of his kind, unique* Son of God. In verse 18, Jesus is said to be *monogenes Theos exegesato; God, the unique, one of a kind Son*, who exegetes or brings forth, or declares the Father.<sup>32</sup> He is able to do this because he comes from the Father’s bosom, denoting the closest possible relationship between the two.<sup>33</sup>

**Jesus:** The Bible does not teach that Jesus became the Son of God only at his baptism. John’s prologue shows that the Father and Son relationship is eternal. Jesus did become human at the incarnation but He did not take on a fallen sinful nature. Jesus was not sinful flesh. Paul said Jesus came, “in the likeness of sinful flesh” (Rom. 8:3). This is reminiscent of Genesis where God made man in His image after His likeness. Jesus was born the second Adam. He was without sin just as Adam was without sin at his creation. He did not mean Jesus was born in sinful flesh. Jesus was raised in the same body in which he was crucified. Jesus said, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.” John then makes it clear what the Lord Jesus meant, “But he spake of the temple of his body” (John 2:19, 21. See also John 20:26-28).

**Holy Spirit:** The Bible teaches that the Holy Spirit is both Personal and Deity.<sup>34</sup> Both the Holy Spirit and Jesus are said to be “the power of God” (Micah 3:8 and 1 Cor. 1:24). Both the Holy Spirit and Jesus are said to be “the Wisdom of God” (1 Cor. 1:24 and Isa. 11:2). Both the Holy Spirit and Jesus were “poured out” (Acts 2:17 and Ps. 22:14). If the personality of the Holy Spirit is denied by Armstrong’s followers based upon the above characteristics then the personality of Jesus must also be denied.<sup>35</sup>

**Salvation:** Acts 2:38 does not teach that baptism or any other good works are a prerequisite for receiving salvation.<sup>36</sup> The bible record states that salvation is by faith in Jesus Christ alone without works.<sup>37</sup> The biblical term *begotten* is not analogous to “unborn fetus” as taught by Armstrong, The Greek word for ‘begotten’ means that which has

already come forth whether of fruit or animal.<sup>38</sup> Believers are not waiting, working, and hoping to be born again at some future time after this life. True believers in this life already have (present tense) received eternal life (not temporary life). 1John 5:13 teaches, "These things have I written unto you that believe on the name of the Son of God: that ye may know that ye have (present tense) eternal life..."

## RECOMMENDED READING

*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. 438 pages.

*Herbert Armstrong's Tangled Web.* David Robinson. An insider's view of Armstrong and his ministry. It covers the struggle for and the abuse of power at Headquarters during the turbulent 1970's. This book is engaging reading and provides an historical perspective to evaluate the church's current doctrinal changes in light of their past problems and changes. 284 pages.

*Transformed by Truth.* Joseph Tkach. This book is written by the current denominational leader of the Worldwide Church of God and covers the remarkable story of how the Worldwide Church of God was transformed by truth. It is a compelling account of how God can change the hearts of and minds. 207 pages.

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Also contributing to this *Profile* were Joseph Tkach, Jr., Ron Kelly, Dixon Cartwright, and James K. Walker.
- <sup>2</sup> Herbert W. Armstrong, *The Plain Truth*, January 1939 and *The Plain Truth*, March/April, 1943, 6.
- <sup>3</sup> Herbert W. Armstrong, *Dear Inner Family of Co-Workers*, April 25, 1972, 1.
- <sup>4</sup> Joseph Martin Hopkins, "Musical Chairs of Change," *Christianity Today*, April 1, 1977, 21.
- <sup>5</sup> Mary Finch, "Garner Ted's own little Church of God is progressing," *Deseret News*, Mon. P.M./Tues. A.M., February 18-17, 1985, 14A.
- <sup>6</sup> Mark Kellner, "Splinter Groups Dismiss Leaders," *Christianity Today*, Vol. 42, No. 3 March 2, 1998, 74.
- <sup>7</sup> <http://www.intercontinentalcog.org/Directory/general.htm>.
- <sup>8</sup> Herbert W. Armstrong, *Letter to All Ministers Worldwide*, February 22, 1974, 1. Also, *Dear Brethren*, May 2, 1974, 25, 27.
- <sup>9</sup> Herbert W. Armstrong, "Why My Son NO Longer Stands 'Back To Back' With Me," *The Good News*, April, 1979, 25.
- <sup>10</sup> George W. Cornell, "Armstrong In Trouble," *Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, January 13, 1979.
- <sup>11</sup> See Ambassador Report on line at <http://www.herbertwarmstrong.com/ar/PaysOff.html>.
- <sup>12</sup> <http://www.watchman.org/cults/wcgexpo.htm>.
- <sup>13</sup> Sermons on tape given in Atlanta, GA and Big Sandy, TX are on file with Watchman Fellowship.
- <sup>14</sup> For a more complete list of Worldwide Church of God splinter groups see, [www.watchman.org/cults/legacyarmstrongism.htm](http://www.watchman.org/cults/legacyarmstrongism.htm).
- <sup>15</sup> Herbert W. Armstrong, "Where This Breakdown In Family Life Is Taking Us!" *The Good News*, February, 1979, 1.
- <sup>16</sup> Herbert W. Armstrong, *The Missing Dimension In Sex*, (Pasadena: Ambassador College Press.1971), 32.
- <sup>17</sup> Herbert W. Armstrong, "What Is the HOLY SPIRIT?" *The Plain Truth*, June, 1956, 23.
- <sup>18</sup> Herbert W. Armstrong, *The Plain Truth*, January 1955, 7.
- <sup>19</sup> Herbert W. Armstrong, "Millions Do Not Know What Christ Really Was!" *The Plain Truth*, July/August, 1955, 4.
- <sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>21</sup> Herbert W. Armstrong, "Why Christ Died and Rose Again!" *The Plain Truth*, April, 1963, 10.
- <sup>22</sup> Herbert W. Armstrong, "The Holy Spirit Is the Power of God!" *Just What Is the Holy Spirit*, reprint ed., Worldwide Church of God (1983), 2.
- <sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 4, 6.
- <sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, "The Spirit of God Throughout the Bible," 4.
- <sup>25</sup> Herbert W. Armstrong, *All About Water Baptism*, (1954), 2.
- <sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.
- <sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.
- <sup>28</sup> Herbert W. Armstrong, *Just What Do You Mean... BORN AGAIN*, (1972 ed.), 17.
- <sup>29</sup> Herbert W. Armstrong, *Dear Brethren Letter* (May 2, 1974), 7.
- <sup>30</sup> <http://www.watchman.org/cults/wcgchart.htm>.
- <sup>31</sup> Exegetical discourse on John 1:1 by Dr. Leroy Metts, Criswell Bible College, taped lectures.
- <sup>32</sup> *Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker House Book Company, 1977) under *monogenhs*.
- <sup>33</sup> Metts discourse on John 1:1.
- <sup>34</sup> Armstrong used similar arguments as the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society to come to similar erroneous conclusions. For a brief rebuttal of these arguments (including no personal name, the use of neuter pronouns, historical arguments, impersonal references, and personification) see Tim Martin, "The Watchtower and the Wholly Other, Holy Spirit," *The Watchman Expositor*, vol. 15, no. 4 (<http://www.watchman.org/w/watchtowerholyspirit.html>).
- <sup>35</sup> <http://www.watchman.org/rektop/holyit.htm>.
- <sup>36</sup> Spiros Zodhiates, Th.D., *The Hebrew-Greek Key Study Bible* (Chattanooga, AMG Publishers, 1984), 1321. See also Acts 2:38 footnote; Dr. H. E. Dana and Dr. Julius R. Mantey, *A Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament* (Toronto, The Macmillan Company, 1957 ed.), 104.
- <sup>37</sup> John 3:16; Ephesians 2:8-9; Titus 3:7; Romans 3:26; 1 John 5:13.
- <sup>38</sup> *Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker House Book Company, 1977) under *gennema*, see John 6:39, also John 6:40, 51; John 10:27-30; Hebrews 10:14; 1 John 5:13; Jude 1:24.



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