

# The Philadelphia Church of God

By Tim Martin

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**Founder:** Gerald Flurry.

**Founding Date:** December, 1989.

**Location:** Edmond, Oklahoma.

**Unique Terms:** God family, Laodicean Era, End Time Elijah, Petra, Last End, Place of Safety.

**Publications:** *The Philadelphia Trumpet, True Education.*

**Broadcast:** The Key of David.

## HISTORY

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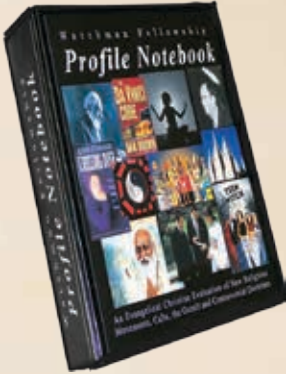
Gerald Flurry incorporated the Philadelphia Church of God in Oklahoma in 1989 after being fired from his position as a minister in the Worldwide Church of God. The Worldwide Church of God (WCG) had long been considered by evangelical Christians to be one of the most prolific publishing and broadcasting cults in America.

Herbert W. Armstrong began a radio ministry in 1933 which evolved into a television program called the World Tomorrow, and in 1968, a church called “The Worldwide Church of God.”<sup>1</sup> He “built a work with an income of \$200 million annually. It started literally from nothing.”<sup>2</sup> “Armstrong visited more than 70 countries proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom of God, and he was highly honored by heads of state in such critical areas as Japan and China, Black and South Africa, Israel and Egypt.”<sup>3</sup> His *Plain Truth* magazine had a distribution of eight million just before his death in 1986.<sup>4</sup> Remarkably, subscriptions were offered free of charge to any who requested it. Most of this was paid for by 82,000 members who were asked to tithe 20-30% percent of their income.<sup>5</sup> Armstrong also established three colleges — the main Ambassador College campus was also the Church’s headquarters located in Pasadena, California.

Shortly after the death of Armstrong (1986), the WCG, under the leadership of Joseph Tkach Sr. began to make doctrinal changes. On March 23, 1987, the church publication, *Worldwide News*, announced the first change.<sup>6</sup> Within a decade, all of Armstrong’s heretical teachings had been repudiated. Tkach transformed a major American-born cult into an evangelical fellowship. Gerald Flurry lists 40 changes in the WCG including discontinuation of Armstrong’s books, removing the God Family doctrine, adding the Trinity, etc.<sup>7</sup> In 1997, “the Worldwide Church of God was accepted as a member of the *National Association of Evangelicals*.”<sup>8</sup> They also joined the *Evangelical Ministries to New Religions* (an association of Christian counter-cult ministries such as Watchman Fellowship) in 1998.

This historic transformation came at a cost. Hundreds of ministers and thousands of WCG members exited the church to form splinter groups loyal to the Armstrong legacy. Among these were Gerald Flurry and his Philadelphia Church of God. In 1989 he founded the Philadelphia Church of God headquartered in Edmond Oklahoma where he functions as Pastor General.<sup>9</sup> It began with only 12 members, but has risen to 6,000 members in 115 countries.<sup>10</sup>

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Gerald Flurry has imitated the ministry of Armstrong in several ways. Similar to the *World Tomorrow* television program, Flurry airs a program called the *Key of David*. “The program is broadcast to over 700 million people in North America, the Pacific rim and the Far East.”<sup>11</sup> The Key of David program offers numerous free books on their website.<sup>12</sup> Most of these books are written by Gerald Flurry, but several are from Armstrong and Steven Flurry (Gerald Flurry’s son). Flurry began republishing Armstrong’s books but was challenged in court by the WCG. A Federal court ordered Flurry to cease publication of the Armstrong material in September, 2000.<sup>13</sup>

Flurry is editor and chief of the *Philadelphia Trumpet* magazine, which is similar to the *Plain Truth* magazine. It boasts to be, “the most informed news source on the planet.”<sup>14</sup> It is free to the public like the *Plain Truth* was. It is paid for by the tithes offered from members in the Philadelphia Church of God.<sup>15</sup> Also, Flurry is publisher and editor to *True Education*, a quarterly magazine for youth.

## DOCTRINES

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As mentioned above, Flurry is an advocate of Armstrong’s teaching. Below is a sampling of their teachings, and one that Flurry introduced.

**Failure of Christianity:** Armstrong claimed that Christianity does not reflect the teachings of the Bible. “I had seen, with my own eyes, that the plain teachings of Christ—of Paul—of the Bible— were not the teachings of the traditional ‘Christianity’ of our time.”<sup>16</sup> In a comparable statement, the *Philadelphia Trumpet* magazine teaches, “The weakness in American fundamentalism has always been the fact that their teachings are based not on the Bible, but on a distorted and twisted interpretation of the Bible.”<sup>17</sup>

Armstrong claimed to reinstate God’s truth through his teaching. According to Flurry, after Armstrong’s death, apostasy came into the organization he established. In *Malachi’s Message To God’s Church Today*, Flurry states, “The WCG (Worldwide Church of God) has moved AWAY FROM THE MESSAGE OF CHRIST and is focusing more and more on the Messenger. Just like the Protestants do.”<sup>18</sup> Gerald Flurry now claims that his organization, the Philadelphia Church of God, is the only one that is remaining faithful to the truth found in Armstrong’s teaching. However, it must be noted that many groups claim to be following the truth restored by Armstrong. Joseph Tkach Jr. lists 104 organizations that have splintered from the Worldwide Church of God.<sup>19</sup>

**The Holy Spirit:** The Holy Spirit is not a person, but an active force emanating from God. Armstrong taught that the Bible reveals “two Personages coexisted and nothing else did. No third Person is mentioned—no ‘Ghost.’”<sup>20</sup> One argument for why the Holy Spirit is not a person comes from an interpretation of Acts 2:18 and 10:45. These verses say that the Holy Spirit is poured out. Armstrong reasons that a person cannot be poured out, “The Holy Spirit, like water or a fluid, can be ‘poured out.’ Can you pour out a person from one into another—as from God into those assembled there?”<sup>21</sup>

Flurry adds argumentation from Paul’s writing. “Paul continually mentioned God the Father and Jesus Christ, but failed to acknowledge the Holy Spirit as a separate, distinct ‘person’ in the Godhead.”<sup>22</sup> Steven Flurry reasons: “If Jesus was begotten of the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit was a third distinct being in the Godhead, that would make the Holy Spirit Jesus Christ’s Father!”<sup>23</sup> However, “Jesus prayed to God His Father.”<sup>24</sup> Hence, if the Holy Spirit was a person, Jesus would have been obligated to call him Father instead of God.

**God:** Although Armstrong used the word omnipresent, he defined it differently than evangelical theologians. He taught that omnipresent means that God can affect changes across the universe, though He is not personally present. He compared this to humans having the ability to see things far away. God can see everything, and “is able to act on such objects or to change it as he wills. Thus, God is omnipresent.”<sup>25</sup>

Another interesting development in Armstrong's theology, is his teaching on the form of God. He acknowledges that God is spirit in essence. However, the appearance of God is human in form. "If you know what a man looks like, you know what is the form and shape of God, for he made man in his image, after his very likeness . . . God has feet and toes and a body. God has a mind."<sup>26</sup>

Armstrong taught that "the word *trinity* is not found in the Bible, nor does the Bible teach this doctrine."<sup>27</sup> He correctly points out that 1 John 5:7-8 does not appear in the older Greek manuscripts,<sup>28</sup> and states that this verse is usually appealed to for supporting the trinity doctrine. Since this verse is not substantiated in the older manuscripts, Armstrong credits Satan as the inspiration of the verse. By doing so, and developing the trinity doctrine, Satan, "completely does away with the gospel of Jesus Christ."<sup>29</sup>

With the trinity out of the way, Armstrong could teach what Steven Flurry called "one of the very foundational doctrines of the WCG,"<sup>30</sup> that is, God is a family. The trinity limited God to only three, and undermines God's purposes.<sup>31</sup> God desires to reproduce Himself with his creation. Jesus was the first to enter the God Family. Subsequently, every person has the ability to become part of the Godhead. "There may become billions of God persons."<sup>32</sup> This is not to say that we will be equal with God the Father. Gerald Flurry states, "the kingdom of God is the family of God. And who is the head of the family? Christ? Of course not! The Father is the head of the family. God the Father is the central figure of the gospel!"<sup>33</sup>

**British Israelism:** As with many other fringe religious groups, Flurry and Armstrong taught that God is only concerned with saving a very few select people, theirs. Armstrong's justification for this comes from his understanding of prophecy. He explains, "after exhaustive study and research, I had found it PROVED that this so called 'lost ten tribes' of Israel had migrated to Western Europe, the British Isles, and later the United States."<sup>34</sup> Once the United States and Britain have been identified as Israel, we can understand that God has not changed his salvific plan to the world. He is still only concerned with saving Israel, however, true Israel is only Armstrong's followers: "we possess the national wealth and resources of the Birthright which God had promised to Abraham through Isaac, Jacob and Joseph."<sup>35</sup> Flurry contends that once one accepts this, they possess the key to unlock Bible prophecy, the key of David. Thus the title of his television program, "The Key of David."<sup>36</sup>

**Flurry's Addition:** Since Armstrong's death, Flurry has taught that the Bible prophesied that the WCG would change direction as it did. However, this is not to say that the truth would be lost. "If God's Church goes astray, Christ rebukes it. If they fail to repent, then He removes the lamp and raises up another Church or Work."<sup>37</sup> Obviously, Flurry believes the other church is the Philadelphia Church of God.

In a public address, Flurry stated that Armstrong fulfilled the role depicted in Matthew 24:14: "And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world . . ."<sup>38</sup> The subsequent verse describes the successor to the WCG, Joseph Tkach Sr.: "so when you see standing in the holy place the abomination that causes desolation . . ." Tkach is standing in the holy place because he became the Pastor General of the WCG after Armstrong died. He is the abomination of desolation because he changed the doctrines that Armstrong restored.

According to Flurry, the time between Armstrong's death and Flurry's reestablishing the truth is depicted in Daniel 8. Verse 14 indicates that 2,300 evenings and mornings will pass before the sanctuary would be cleansed. After explaining that 2,300 actually refers to 1,150 days, Flurry reveals that this was the time period in between Armstrong's death and the writing of his book, *Malachi's Message To God's Church Today*.<sup>39</sup> Finally, God is testing his people with the changes in the WCG. "God's church has been flooded with His precious truth. Now God is going to see if we JUST TALK about faith—or REALLY LIVE BY FAITH—by His word. Do we *remember* what we were taught and live by it?"<sup>40</sup>

## BIBLICAL RESPONSE

**Holy Spirit:** The Holy Spirit is a person. Christian theologian Millard Erickson explains that “the Holy Spirit engages in moral actions and ministries which can be performed only by a person. Among these activities are teaching, regenerating, searching, speaking, interceding, commanding, testifying, guiding, illuminating, revealing.”<sup>41</sup>

**God:** God is not reproducing Himself as a family. He has made it clear that He will not give His glory to others, and that He will not create other Gods (Isaiah 42:8, 43:10, 44:6-8).

**British Israelism:** It may be true that a few Israelites escaped the Assyrians and migrated to Europe. However, by the time of the New Testament, all tribes were present (Acts 4:10, 5:21, 13:24, 26:7, James 1:1, I Peter 1:1, Revelation 7:4-8).

## RECOMMENDED READING

*Worldwide Church of God: Living Under the Law* by 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.

*Worldwide Church of God: A Broken Wineskin* by 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*.

*Transformed by Truth* by Joseph Tkach Jr. The Worldwide Church of God, founded by Herbert Armstrong, was considered a cult for sixty years. Mr. Tkach, the present Pastor General of the church, describes the transition that has taken place to transform the church to orthodox Christianity. It has a photo section and Roots of WCG chart, 207 pgs.

### Notes

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21. *Mystery of the Ages*, 47.
22. Gerald Flurry, *Worldwide Church of God Doctrinal Changes and the Tragic Results*, (Philadelphia Church of God, 1999) 71.
23. Flurry, Stephen, *God is a Family*, (Philadelphia Church of God: 1999), 16.
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27. Ibid., 34.
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30. Stephen Flurry, *God is a Family*, (Philadelphia Church of God, 1999), 1-2.
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32. Ibid.
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