

THE WORLD WIDE CHURCH OF GOD

The World Wide Church of God was founded by Herbert W. Armstrong, who was born in Des Moines, Iowa, U.S.A. in 1892.

19 Herbert was raised in Christian family and in early in life he joined the Methodists. At this stage he was only a nominal church member, most of his time and effort were put into his advertising business. In the 1920's, after his business crashed, Herbert Armstrong began to take a new interest in religion, largely through the influence of his wife. Unfortunately, Mrs. Armstrong's religious beliefs were in error. She had a defective view of the doctrine of salvation and the fall of man. She believed that keeping the law was a prerequisite of salvation. She held, contrary to Scripture, that a person had the ability to keep the ten commandments without the help of God.²⁰ This was contrary to her husband's belief. He had been raised to believe in salvation by grace alone through faith alone. So an argument resulted between Herbert and his wife on this subject. Herbert undertook to study the Scriptures himself, in order to prove to his wife that she was wrong, and to show that people are saved by grace alone, as he had always been taught. As a result of his studies, he reached the same conclusion as his wife, and adopted her erroneous view, that keeping the law was a precondition to salvation. This was the turning point in Herbert's life, from that point on all his efforts were devoted to preaching this doctrine of salvation by human works.

In 1931, Herbert Armstrong was ordained into the ministry of a small break-away group of the Seventh Day Adventists.²¹ However, it was not long before he quarreled with his new ministerial colleagues, so that he left them. On the first Sunday in 1934 he began the "Worldwide Church of God" with a radio broadcast, and also in that same year he started the publication of his magazine, The Plain Truth.²² Armstrong operated from Pasadena, California, U.S.A, where he established the first of his "Ambassador Colleges". His efforts, in utilizing the radio, proved extremely profitable. His broadcasts reached many millions of people throughout the world. His magazine, "The Plain Truth," also proved a very successful means of extending his cult throughout the world. Millions of copies of this magazine have been distributed free throughout the world. The growth of the World Wide Church of God has been due, to a large extent, to its use of radio and television. Walter Martin says:

"Of all the cultic structures, the World Wide Church of God sponsors more radio broadcasts and television programs on more stations than any other cultic group in the world, and in fact more than its five top competitors combined!"²³

5.2 THE W.W.C.G's VIEW OF ITS OWN ORGANIZATION.

Herbert Armstrong considered himself a prophet who was appointed by God to restore true Christianity, which he considered disappeared in A.D.70. He believed and taught that the church became corrupt in A.D.70, and remained in this corrupt state until God raised up his organization. He believed that through his organization, God was once again restoring the true gospel. He maintained that he was the one whom God was using to speak the plain truth. In the following quote, written and published by Herbert Armstrong, he shows that he believed himself to be the one whom God was using to re-establish the true Christian faith.

"Yet is there anything so shocking and so hard to believe as this statement that the whole world is religiously deceived? Thirty seven years ago I simply couldn't believe it until I found it proved! And even then, my head was swimming. I found myself all mixed up. To see with my own eyes in the Bible precisely the opposite of what I had been taught from boyhood in Sunday school, well this was pretty hard to take, yet there it was in plain type before my eyes! If this were the year A.D. 30 and you took a trip to Jerusalem and there speaking to a throng around him you should see an ordinary looking young man about the age of 33 teaching the same thing you hear me and Garner Ted Armstrong say over the radio today, it would have been just as astonishing to you then as it is today - and it was to these who heard Him then. You would have been truly astonished! His doctrine was so different! And He spoke dogmatically with assurance with power and authority ... Yet He had foretold a prophecy. He had foretold wolves coming in sheep's clothing to deceive the world. He had said they would enter in professing to come in His name, claiming to be Christian, yet deceiving the whole world. That happened! For two 19 year time cycles the original apostles did proclaim this gospel, the gospel of the Kingdom of God, but in A.D. 69 they fled. In A.D. 70 came the military siege against Jerusalem. The ministers of Satan had wormed their way in, had gained such power that by persecution of political influence they were able to brand the true people of God as heretics and prevent further organized proclaiming of the same gospel Christ brought from God. For eighteen and one half centuries that gospel was not

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proclaiming of the same gospel Christ brought from God. For eighteen and one half centuries that gospel was not preached. The world was deceived into accepting a false gospel. Today, Christ has raised up His work and once again allotted two 19 year time cycles for proclaiming His same gospel, preparatory to His second coming.... "The World Tomorrow" and "The Plain Truth" are Christ's own instruments which He is powerfully using. Yes, His message is shocking today. Once again it is the voice in the wilderness of religious confusion!"²⁴

According to Herbert Armstrong, his organization is "the voice in the wilderness of religious confusion." In his view the church has been apostate for eighteen centuries. He understood himself to be God's instrument to lead people back to Christ. This was quite an amazing claim, but does it stand the test of investigation? As we consider the teachings of this cult we shall see that it Herbert Armstrong was an instrument of the devil to lead people away from Jesus Christ.

5.3 THE W.W.C.G HAS A DEFECTIVE VIEW OF GOD.

We shall see as we investigate the teachings of this cult that it has a defective view of God. Herbert Armstrong's cult, like most cults, denies the Trinitarian nature of God.

Denial of the Trinity.

Herbert Armstrong was hostile to the doctrine of the Trinity. He rejected the view that the Holy Spirit is a person at all, he regards this as a heresy introduced by pagan prophets. He believed that God is like a family. He held that God the Father and Jesus Christ the Son are the two original members of this family, but they are not alone. For in his understanding on the day of the resurrection those who have joined Armstrong's organization will join God and the Son, and become part of the family of God and be gods. Note the following statement made by him:

"The purpose of life is that in us God is really re-creating his own kind - reproducing himself after His own kind - for we are, upon real conversion, actually begotten as sons (yet unborn) of God; then, through study of God's revelation in His Word, living by His very Word, constant prayer, daily experience with trials and testing, we grow spiritually more and more like God, until, at the time of the resurrection we shall be instantaneously changed from mortal into immortal, we shall then be born of God - We shall then be God! You are setting out on a training to become Creator - to become God! When we are born of God, we shall be of His very family - we shall be spirit as He is Spirit - immortal as He is immortal - divine as He is Divine! Christ was born a Son of God by a resurrection from the dead (Romans 1:4).....the only human so far born of God, though many have already been begotten. Yes, just the first of many brethren, in the very image of bright shining glory of the invisible God. And we are to be conformed to the same image (Romans 8:29) I suppose most people think of God as one single individual Person. Or, as a "trinity". This is not true. Now, remember the true Christian is an heir of God (Galatians 3:29) and a joint heir with Christ (Romans 8:17) We are to be glorified together with him. Christ is now an inheritor - a possessor. We are still only heirs - not yet inheritors - not until we are born again! Yes, the name "God" as God revealed it in the Hebrew language, is a name like family, church, or team.....only, we see not yet this entire universe put under the dominion of mankind!.. but theologians and "Higher Critics" have blindly accepted the heretical and false prophets who crept in, that the Holy Spirit is a third person - the heresy of the "trinity". This limits God to "Three Persons". This denies that Christ, through His Holy Spirit, actually comes now into the converted Christian and does His saving work on the inside." ²⁵

An examination of the quote above reveals that Armstrong believed that men can become God. What he taught and what his followers believe is that God is a family. He taught that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are three separate entities who constitute a family or a team. He also taught, as indicated in the quote above, that people will join God's family and become God. You will notice that he asserted that the doctrine of the Trinity is a heresy. This is most clearly contrary to the teaching of the Bible.

Defective view of Christology.

The World Wide Church has seriously defective views about Jesus Christ. While this cult does accept the doctrine of Christ's deity and His human nature, it regards Christ as having had a sinful nature. Note what Herbert Armstrong said:

"Christ, one of the beings in the Godhead, had now been changed into flesh - still having the personality and will to do right which distinguished Him as an entity - yet now had become human, having human nature with all of its desire, weaknesses and lusts - and subject to death just like any other human. The Satan-inspired doctrine that Jesus was not human, that He did not inherit the human nature of Adam, that He did not have all the normal human passions and weaknesses against which all of us have to struggle - in a word, that Jesus did not really come "in the flesh" as a normal human being - This is the doctrine of the anti-Christ. Notice Romans 8:3 "God sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh." The idea Satan is trying to put across is that it is impossible for man to keep the spiritual law

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likeness of sinful flesh. The idea Satan is trying to put across is that it is impossible for man to keep the spiritual law of God, and so Jesus came as a Savior - not "in the flesh" with the normal human nature - but through "special process" so that He could keep the law of God in our stead to die for us! But His obedience was our example!...that Jesus taught, "If thou wilt enter into life, keep the commandments" (Matthew 19:17)...We are not only to keep the letter of the law, but to follow it as it is magnified throughout the Bible in "every word of God" (2 Corinthians 3:6). Satan, the Devil, through His false ministers who appear as "ministers of righteousness" (2 Corinthians 11:13,15), is trying to deceive the world into believing in a false Christ - a Christ who did away with the Father's spiritual law and made it possible for us to inherit eternal life without having to build, with the help of God's Spirit, the kind of holy, righteous character which would enable us to obey God's eternal, spiritual law both now and forever."26

This is not the plain truth at all, it is a plain lie. Herbert Armstrong argues, in the above quote, that Jesus had precisely the same nature with which you and I are born. He speaks of Christ, as being beset with the same "weakness and lusts" that we have. Now, the weaknesses that we have as humans, and the lusts that we struggle against, are the results of the fall. If Jesus had been beset with such weaknesses, then He would never have been able to live a sinless life. What made Jesus different was that He was born without our sinful nature and without our predisposition to sin. He was born in exactly the same state that Adam was in before the fall. The Bible presents man as a slave to sin, but Jesus was not a slave to sin. He was born of the virgin Mary, which is very significant, since He was not related to Adam. The apostle Paul, in Romans chapter five, teaches that mankind fell in Adam, not in Eve. No curse came through Eve, it came through Adam. Adam is the representative head of the entire human race. Jesus was not related to Adam, He did not have a human father, He was begotten by the Holy Spirit. Since Jesus Christ did not have a human father, He was not born a slave to sin. Jesus was born with a nature that was untainted by original sin. If Jesus did inherit Adam's nature, then He would not have been able to rise above it, He would have been a sinner, and He would have sinned. Paul clearly contrasts Adam and Christ in Romans chapter five, they are not a common humanity, they are two different humanities.

5.4 ARMSTRONG'S CULT DENIES THE RESURRECTION.

Herbert Armstrong's view of Christ's resurrection was unbiblical. The Bible teaches that Jesus Christ rose from the dead, and that His resurrected body was real. There was a real continuity between His pre-resurrection body and His post-resurrection body. This is not what Herbert Armstrong taught. He taught that Christ's resurrected body was no longer human, and that Jesus Christ became a spirit in His resurrection. Note the following quote from the Plain Truth:

"Now, notice carefully God the Father did not cause Jesus Christ to get back into the body which had died"27.

In this same issue of the Plain Truth, Armstrong said:

"The resurrected body was no longer human - it was the Christ resurrected, immortal, once again changed. As He had been changed, converted into mortal human flesh and blood, subject to death, and for the purpose of dying for our sins, now, by a resurrection from the dead, He was again changed, converted to immortality - and He is alive forevermore."28

It is evident from such statements that Herbert Armstrong denied the resurrection. For Christ's resurrected body is no longer His human body. How then does Herbert Armstrong explain the fact that the disciples saw the nail prints in Jesus' resurrected body? The resurrection of Jesus Christ has been uniformly held by the Christian church since apostolic days. Jesus Christ's resurrection was a physical resurrection, not a spiritual resurrection (Luke 24:39).

5.5 THE WORLD WIDE CHURCH'S DEFECTIVE VIEW OF SALVATION.

The World Wide Church of God has a defective view of salvation. Like the Christadelphians it also believes in salvation by keeping the law. Let us then examine their doctrine of salvation.

Defective view of the new birth.

Herbert Armstrong had a defective view of the Biblical doctrine of salvation, and this is readily observable in his doctrine of the new birth. According to his teaching, the new birth is not one single event, but two events. The first, or initial event, takes place upon the acceptance of Jesus Christ as the Son of God; at this time the believer is impregnated with the life of God through the Holy Spirit, which Armstrong terms "begetting." The second phase is the new birth itself, which does not take place until the resurrection of the body. His doctrine can best be explained by the analogy of human birth. He believed that at the point of faith in Christ a person is conceived, this conception period continues throughout our earthly life, the actual birth takes place at the resurrection. Note the following statement

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continues throughout our earthly life, the actual birth takes place at the resurrection. Note, the following statement from his publications:

"If we overcome, grow in grace and knowledge and endure unto the end, then.... this flesh and blood body shall become a spirit body! Then, and not until then, shall we be fully born of God. We are saved by grace, and through faith - make no mistake about that; but there are conditions! It is only those who, during this Christian, Spirit-begotten life, have grown in knowledge and grace, have overcome, have developed spiritually, done the works of Christ, and endured unto the end, who shall finally be given immortality - finally changed from mortal to immortal at the time of the Second Coming of Christ."²⁹

He also said:

"After people are actually born of God, they too, shall be spirit, just as God is Spirit. They will be invisible to material human sight, just as the angels are. He is now begotten of God. The very life and nature of God has entered into him, impregnating him with immortal spirit - life, exactly as the physical sperm cell from the human father enters into the ovum or physical egg-cell when a new human life is first conceived, impregnated, or begotten. But, just as that tiny ovum, as small as a pin-point, is merely begotten of its human father - not yet born - so the converted human is, at what we properly call, conversion, merely begotten of God the heavenly Father - not yet born."³⁰

It is evident from the above quotes that Herbert Armstrong had an unbiblical doctrine of the new birth. According to his view a person is not born again until he is resurrected. A converted person is merely "begotten" or "conceived". Not all who are conceived will be born again, but only those who prove themselves worthy of the new birth by keeping the commandments. So then, according to Herbert Armstrong, the new birth is the reward one receives for living a worthy life. This is a denial of the Biblical doctrine of the new birth. For, the apostle John clearly demonstrates that the new birth is something which is completed in this world. (1 John 5:1) The idea that the new birth is a reward for our faithfulness is completely contrary to the teachings of Scripture.

Salvation by keeping the law.

Herbert Armstrong denied the common Protestant and Biblical doctrine of salvation by grace alone through faith alone. He maintained that Jesus did not do enough to secure our salvation by dying on the cross, we must supplement His work by our own keeping of the law. He said:

"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 is all there is to it; believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you are that instant saved!" That teaching is false! And because of deception - because the true Gospel of Jesus Christ has been blotted out, lo these 1900 years by the preaching of a false gospel about the person of Christ - and often a false Christ at that - millions today worship Christ - and all in vain! The blood of Christ does not finally save any man. The death of Christ merely paid the penalty of sin in our stead - it wipes the slate clean of past sins - it saves us merely from the death penalty - it removes that which separated us from God and reconciles us to God. But we are saved - that is, given immortal life - by Christ's life, not by His death (Rom. 5:10). It is only those who, during this Christian, Spirit-begotten life, have grown in knowledge and grace, have overcome, have developed spiritually, done the works of Christ, and endured unto the end, who shall finally be given immortality - finally changed from mortal to immortal at the time of the Second Coming of Christ". (1 Corinthians 15:53,54)³¹

Armstrong's error is the same as that which existed in the church at Galatia. Certain heretics in the Galatian Church were saying, faith plus circumcision was necessary for salvation. Paul called this "another gospel" and a false gospel. Herbert Armstrong taught that a person is saved by faith plus their own good works. The Bible does teach that a Christian should keep God's law, but the keeping of the law is the result of our salvation not its cause. We are saved unto good works, not by good works. (Eph. 2:10) Listen to the apostle Paul!

"All who rely on observing the law are under a curse, for it is written: 'Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law.' Clearly no one is justified before God by the law, because, 'The righteous will live by faith'." (Gal. 3:10,11).

As is clearly evident Herbert Armstrong's doctrine of salvation is entirely contrary to the teaching of the Holy Scriptures.

5 / CONCLUSION

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3.8 CONCLUSION

As we have seen, there were many errors in the theology of Mr. Herbert Armstrong. He has left behind him a cult that has an heretical view of God which denies the Trinitarian nature of God. He has deceived many people into believing that they can earn their salvation by keeping the law. There are many other things which he taught that are also contrary to the teaching of the Bible.

Since the death of Herbert Armstrong, the World Wide Church of God has undergone numerous changes. There are some indications that the cult, under its new leadership, has turned away from its more serious aberrations and is headed in the direction of orthodox Christian teaching. If this does prove to be the case then we thank God and long for the day when many of the other cults depart from their heresies.

19William Peterson Those Curious New Cults Keats Publishing Inc Canaan Connecticut U.S.A, 1973, p.110.

20ibid p.110

21Walter Martin Herbert Armstrong and the Radio Church of God, Bethany House Publishers, Minneapolis, 1985, pp.7f

22Walter Martin The Kingdom of The Cults Bethany House Pub' , Minneapolis Minnesota, 1981, p.296.

23Walter Martin Herbert Armstrong and the Radio Church of God, op cit pp.6,7

24Herbert Armstrong The Inside Story of the World Tomorrow Broadcast (Quoted by Walter Martin Kingdom of the Cults, Bethany House Publishers, Minneapolis Minnesota, 1977, p.306

25Herbert Armstrong Just What does it mean - Born Again p.17-19.

26Herbert Armstrong The Plain Truth Volume 28, November, 1963.

27Herbert Armstrong The Plain Truth April, 1963.

28ibid

29Herbert Armstrong All About Water Baptism p.6, (Quoted by Walter Martin Kingdom of the Cults op cit p.312)

30ibid, p.11

31ibid, pp. 1-3