

5 Herbert W. Armstrong's Worldwide Church of God

The *Worldwide Church of God* owes its beginning to Herbert W. Armstrong, who like many cult leaders claims to be the only one capable of correctly interpreting scripture.

5.1 History

Herbert W. Armstrong's interest in the Bible began in 1927 after his wife brought the particular teachings of her church, the *Church of God – Seventh Day*, to his attention. Trying to prove them wrong he studied their beliefs intensively and finally accepted them. In 1933, he was ordained a minister of that church and shortly afterwards began broadcasting a radio program called *The Radio Church of God* and publishing a magazine called *The Plain Truth*. Because his teachings deviated more and more from that of the *Church of God – Seventh Day* his ordination was later revoked. He continued his ministry by radio and magazine and eventually founded his *Worldwide Church of God*.

While the church itself never grew larger than about 100,000 members, its radio and television programs reached millions of Americans. About 8 million copies of *The Plain Truth* magazines were sold each month in 187 countries. During its peak time the church reported donations of more than 200 million dollars per year, which is due to an extreme emphasis on works and over-tithing as requirement for salvation.

Armstrong's message was a mixture of Seventh Day Adventism, Jewish observances of the law, and specific cultist doctrines which were claimed to be special revelations from God. Herbert W. Armstrong wrote

The prophecies and mysteries of God, sealed until now, are today revealed to those whom God has chosen to carry his last message to the world as a witness

and also claims that his *Worldwide Church of God* is the only true church of God while all others are counterfeits. Yet most of his doctrines are very similar to those of Jehova's Witnesses, Mormonism, and British Israelism – thus in no way unique to Armstrong. There was also a major focus on predictive prophesy. For instance, it was predicted that Jesus Christ would return in 1975, which of course did not happen and caused the church to lose many members in the late seventies.

Shortly before his death in 1986, Armstrong passed his authoritarian power as Pastor General to Joseph Tkach, a member of the board who had worked up through the ranks because of his unswerving loyalty to Armstrong. Ironically, Tkach used his power to change the *Worldwide Church of God's* doctrines after Armstrong's death to a more orthodox position, despite a widespread opposition among members. By 1995 the *Worldwide Church of God* had eventually become a bible-believing church, which today (July 1999) is even admitted by the most sceptical anti-cult organizations.

The only criticism is that the church still maintains its authoritarian leadership structure as well as a certain lack of fiscal responsibility, and declares that it really has

been “Christian” all the time, which is hard to understand given the radical changes of the past 13 years. However, we can praise God for turning the Church around. It is one of the most striking examples how God uses his Word to “demolish strongholds” – as **2. Corinthians 10:4** says – which by human terms already seemed invincible.

5.2 Major Doctrines – where are the differences?

In what we will discuss today I will focus on the time before the changes, that is on *Armstrongism*. As I mentioned, Armstrong did reach millions of Americans and certainly influenced many who never joined his church but brought his teachings into other churches. Like the Mormons, Armstrongism denies the Trinity but believes that every man can eventually become God. As Jehova’s Witnesses, he sees Jesus Christ as a God, but inferior to God the Father. Like both, it teaches salvation by faith in Jesus Christ and additional obedience to the law. But there are a few new doctrines that we have not discussed so far.

Central to Armstrong’s teachings is the belief in *British Israelism*, which strongly influences the way in which the bible is interpreted. The basic theory of British Israelism is that the Anglo-Saxons, that is Britain and its former empire, are the ten lost tribes of Israel. The argument goes roughly as follows.

1. God’s promise to Abraham was to be the father of many nations of which the Jews are only one (Judah).
2. God’s promise to David was to establish his throne forever (**2. Samuel 7:13**) so it must exist today.
3. Israel lost its identity in 721 B.C., when its people were taken captive and became known as the *ten lost tribes*.
4. According to Jacob’s prophecy Ephraim was promised to become a multitude of nations, a commonwealth – which must be today’s Great Britain.
5. Manasseh is the United States.

This theory, which came up way before Armstrong’s times, is supported by a massive abuse of language. The name Saxon’s is supposed to be derived from Isaac-son while British is composed from the Hebrew words *Brit* – meaning *covenant* – and *Ish* – meaning *man*. While composed foreign words did make their way into the English language, this explanation must be viewed as pure fantasy without any evidence. Nevertheless, there are quite a few British and American cults, Armstrongism included, which hold to that teaching because it gives them a special role as God’s chosen people.

5.2.1 Sources of Authority – anything but the Bible?

The only recognized source of authority in the *Worldwide Church of God* is said to be the Bible. However, Armstrong claimed³⁶ that his church has the only true inter-

pretation of the Word of God, which essentially says that you cannot interpret the Bible yourself. So the final authority for members of the *Worldwide Church of God* were Armstrong's writings and not the text of the Bible.

5.2.2 God

God is the creator, the beginner, the one who caused us to have life, and so is called our father.

At a first glance, Armstrong seems to have an orthodox concept of God. However, he declares the doctrine of the trinity to be pagan and teaches instead that "*God is a family, a kingdom, NOT a limited trinity*". This family consists currently only of God the Father and the God of Abraham, who later became Jesus Christ, the son of God. But God's intent, Armstrong teaches, is to reproduce himself. All children of God will eventually become God as well, who "*will counsel and advise our Creator*". This is very close to what the *eternal progression* in Mormonism expresses but it goes to an even greater extreme.

5.2.3 Jesus Christ

Christ has existed from all eternity with the Father. He is one with the Father, but he is subordinate to him.

In contrast to Mormonism, Jehova's Witnesses, or the Way International, Armstrong teaches that Jesus Christ is co-eternal and one with God the Father. In fact *HE* was Jehova, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He was *not* the son of God before he was born of the virgin Mary. And in the incarnation, he ceased to be God and became fully man. As a man he developed the perfection of spiritual character that was necessary to become our savior and to pay the penalty for our sin.

Crucified on a Wednesday, he ceased to exist for 3 days and was raised again on Saturday at the end of the Jewish Sabbath. But his body disappeared. He was no longer human but an immortal divine being and again a member of the family of God.

In contrast to that the Bible teaches (e.g. **Philippians 2:6**) that Jesus never ceased to be God, although he limited himself to a human form. His body was raised as his disciples could clearly testify. **John 20:20** and **20:27** are very specific about that.

5.2.4 The Holy Spirit

Armstrong flatly denies the personality of the Holy Spirit. As for Jehova's witnesses, for him the Holy Spirit is just the "*mind and the very power of God, which expresses the unified, creative will of the God family*". It is what we receive during conversion.

5.2.5 Man

The creation of mankind, so Armstrong teaches took place approximately 6000 years ago. Man was created as a living soul with a potential for immortality. But the fall was planned and permitted by God. Otherwise, so it is argued, Satan would have outwitted God and this cannot be.

Like Jehova's Witnesses the *Worldwide Church of God* taught that the soul is NOT immortal. It goes into a phase of *soul sleep* after death and only becomes immortal at the resurrection of the righteous. The souls of the unrighteous, however, will be annihilated at the judgment.

5.2.6 Salvation

Armstrong's concept of salvation involves both faith and works. Acceptance of Jesus Christ cleanses from past sins and enables to keep the law. But justification will only be given on the condition that the law is kept. Only those who develop spiritually shall finally be given immortality. So under Armstrong a member of the *Worldwide Church of God* could never have any assurance of salvation. He could only try hard to observe all kinds of religious laws:

Water Baptism is viewed as absolute essential. "*There is no promise that anyone will receive the Holy Spirit until baptized in water.*"

The bible clearly separates these two events. You receive the Holy Spirit immediately when you accept Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior. Water Baptism is a sign of obedience but not necessary for salvation.

Sabbath: "*To break God's Holy Sabbath is sin and the penalty is eternal death*"

This teaching is apparently derived from the former doctrines of the Seventh Day Adventists and is clearly unbiblical. Armstrong is correct in observing that we are often too negligent about observing the Lord's Day. But the emphasis on the Sabbath (Saturday) is not supported by the New Testament, and – like any other sin – it certainly does not lead to eternal death.

I must admit that teaching this doctrine is a good trick for making the congregation attend church regularly, and that was apparently the intended effect.

Observance of annual feast days: But besides the Sabbath, the *Worldwide Church of God* required its members to keep a variety of Jewish annual feasts. These are the *Passover*, the *Feast of Unleavened Bread*, *Pentecost*, the *Feast of Trumpets*, and the *Day of Atonement*. To each of these festivals, Armstrong gave an additional Christian interpretation, like the Lord's Supper during Passover or the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.

The 10 commandments: However, celebrating Christmas, Easter, New Years Day, and even birthday is considered as idolatry. According to Armstrong, the second commandment (**Exodus 20:4**) excludes such festivals. The interpretation of the other commandments is similarly strict. The seventh commandment, for instance, is said to mean that only a first marriage is valid. Divorce is sinful for whatever reason (which is basically correct if you consider all aspect that eventually led to a divorce) and marriage after a divorce is adultery.

I have my doubts whether this interpretation is biblical. Every sin can be forgiven and divorce is not the “unpardonable sin”.

The Dietary regulations of Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14 are mandatory, as are the decisions of the Jerusalem Council of Acts 15. No consideration is given to the context of these requirements.

Smoking is considered a sin, drinking alcoholic beverages is not. The Bible does not condemn either of the two, but it condemns excess (drunkenness) and reminds us in **1. Corinthians 3:16–17** that our body is the temple of the Holy Spirit and should not be defiled. Christian churches have different opinions about how to interpret that, because it is not entirely clear what “defiling” means and what is beneficial for our body. This is one of the issues where I often see traditions decide on the doctrines of a local church.

I believe that **1. Corinthians 10:31** gives us a good guideline for that.

Whether therefore ye eat, or drink, or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God.

Tithing was and still is a major emphasis in the *Worldwide Church of God*. In practice this includes a first tithe (10 percent), a second, sometimes even a third. Some members feel obliged to give 30–40% of their income to the church out of fear that otherwise they will not be saved. Their money goes directly to the headquarter of the *Worldwide Church of God* and is managed by the Pastor General.

This reminds me a little bit of the practices of the Roman Catholic church in the late middle ages. Tithing in the *Worldwide Church of God* has become the modern equivalent to indulgences: the church headquarter becomes extremely rich while the members try to buy their way into heaven because they have no assurance of salvation.

Tithing is a necessary act of obedience. If we steal from God by withholding our tithe (or parts of it) from Him, we will experience difficulties to grow spiritually. But that does NOT mean that tithing is necessary for salvation.

Armstrong takes his justification for these requirements from the Old Testament and **Matthew 5:17–18**, where Jesus states that he did not come to change the law.

So under the “Armstrong covenant” the believer is still under the law and the only advantage over those who did not accept Christ is that he is able to keep it.

5.2.7 Things to come

In his various publications and courses Armstrong claims that he would be able to interpret biblical prophecy and to reveal the future like no one else. He maintained this position even after his failed prediction that the world would end in 1972.

According to Armstrong we are already in the last days that precede the Great Tribulation. The Tribulation will last 3-1/2 years and will then be followed by a time of God’s wrath – the sixth seal of **Revelation 6:12–13**. During that time the faithful will be protected in Petra, the ancient rock-walled city on Edom. The climax of this period will be the second coming of Christ.

After the battle of Armageddon, the first resurrection will take place: the just will rise, become immortal, and reign together with Christ for 1000 years. Those “*who haven’t had a fair chance to hear the truth*” will partake in the second resurrection during the millenium. They will hear the gospel and have a second chance to convert. Those who don’t will be cast into the lake of fire. After the judgment of the great white throne, the “*handful of recalcitrant sinners*” will be resurrected and cast into the lake of fire – which for Armstrong is the same as annihilation.

Many of these “revelations” appear to be a combination of human imagination and biblical terminology. There is no second chance to believe in Christ, not even for those who died before Christ came to earth – they had other means to receive forgiveness of sin. The bible clearly says in **Hebrews 9:27** that after death everybody will face judgment. And those who are condemned will not be annihilated but punished forever.

None of the doctrines of Armstrongism were really new. It appears that Armstrong was influenced by many other cults at the time, and his doctrines can be refuted in the same way we would prove the Mormons or Jehova’s Witnesses wrong. However, the mixture and a few details were new and for some people Armstrongism appeared easier to accept than Mormonism or Jehova’s Witnesses. Millions of Americans have been reached by Armstrong’s messages and even Christians have accepted some of them as plausible interpretations of the Word of God. This is the real danger of Armstrongism today and we must keep our eyes open lest we be seduced to accept interpretations of the Bible that have little to do with the truth.