



"The study of God's Word for the purpose of discovering God's will is the secret discipline which has formed the greatest characters."

—Henry David Thoreau

16-Jan-26

Forty Years On

January 16, 2026, marks the fortieth anniversary of Herbert W. Armstrong's death. I remember that day quite clearly. I was a sophomore at Ambassador College in Pasadena, California, and employed by Church Administration to assist the office in various functions (in the vernacular, I was a "gofer"). When I reported for work that morning at 8 o'clock, there was a palpable feeling that something big had taken place, and it took me all of three seconds to find out that Mr. Armstrong had died earlier that morning.

His death was not unexpected, as it was common knowledge that his health was rapidly declining. Joseph Tkach, the new Pastor General, quickly put a transition team into action, and plans were put into motion for announcing Mr. Armstrong's death to the church and the press, arranging his funeral, developing a tribute telecast, informing the students and employees on campus, making legal adjustments for the smooth operation of the church, and doing a host of other activities. Condolences began pouring into Pasadena from all over [the world](#) by telex, fax, and phone. I remember being handed a thick stack of them and being impressed by all the "big names," both foreign and domestic, who took the trouble to convey their sympathies.

The next few days and weeks were, to me, a blur of activity, highlighted by specific events that loomed large at the time: Mr. Armstrong's funeral, the huge response figures for the tribute *World Tomorrow* program, the introduction of the new *World Tomorrow* presenters, the move "upstairs" by Joseph Tkach, his inaugural church visits around the country and the world (on one of which, to Chicago, I was permitted to go), the "We Are Family" campaign, etc. Those were heady days. The church appeared to have transitioned peacefully and prosperously to the new regime.

It did not take long for those exhilarating days to end.

Most people in the church are unaware that the doctrinal changes began to be enacted almost immediately. It began with "little things" slipped into a Pastor General's Report or implemented without much fanfare as counsel in individual cases. The first may have been backpedaling on teaching that married women, especially those with children, should be homemakers. There were flip-flops on applauding special music and women wearing makeup. Many of Herbert Armstrong's booklets were edited, demoted, or retired and replaced altogether. The church's teaching found in *The United States and Britain in Prophecy* was questioned, ridiculed, and subsequently dropped.

The first core doctrinal change—concerning [faith](#), Christ's sacrifice, and healing—occurred in early 1987, just over a year later. Elements of this change were theologically correct, for instance, that [sin](#) is sin, the transgression of God's law (I John 3:4, KJV), no matter whether it is physical or spiritual in nature. However, the practical effect of the larger shift in doctrine was to disconnect faith from healing—and, really, from anything else—to the extent that it became negligible.

Once this major tenet of the church's teaching fell, others, like dominoes, were doomed to fall also. Soon, certain [Sabbath](#) teachings were relaxed, hints of Trinitarianism began to bubble out of headquarters, and [the gospel](#) of the [Kingdom of God](#) (Mark 1:14) was downgraded in favor of "the gospel of grace" and "the gospel of [Jesus](#)." All of this took place before 1992 began, and many more changes would follow.

In a relatively short time, then, the work of Herbert Armstrong, which had taken about sixty years to build, was dismantled. Certainly, a decade after his death, the [Worldwide Church of God](#) was essentially unrecognizable as the church [God](#) had raised up through him. Forty years on, it is not even called the "Worldwide Church of God" any longer because, in the words of Joseph Tkach, Jr., "[The old] name does not properly represent us." He was right. With its mainline Protestant teachings, it no longer characterized, nor deserved, the name!

Notwithstanding such praise, Herbert Armstrong was a fallible man, and some would argue that he made many mistakes, both doctrinal and administrative. His fixation on preaching the gospel, while commendable, blinded him to other areas that should have received his attention, particularly to many church members' desperate need for strong, thorough instruction in God's way of life. In addition, his authoritarianism is legendary, but it was highly effective in promoting and accomplishing his vision of God's work on earth. A person cannot head a global evangelistic organization without these traits.

It is too bad that, for many people, his negatives overshadow his positives. He was a wonderful teacher, due in many respects to his advertising skills. He could bore right to the heart of an issue, gather what was necessary to understand it, and explain it in uncomplicated terms so that a person of average intelligence could grasp it. Unlike many in these "nuanced" times, he was at times painfully, even offensively, direct, but there was never any doubt where he stood on an issue. He was also doggedly stubborn, refusing to modify a doctrine until he was absolutely convinced that the change was biblically correct. These qualities, combined with the sheer force of his charisma, kept the church's teaching relatively stable for many decades, which produced much good fruit.

William Shakespeare wrote, "The web of our life is of a mingled yarn, good and ill together." The skein of Herbert Armstrong's life contained more good yarn than ill, and for that, we can praise God that He weaves the lives of such servants into ours. Would there were more of his fiber!

- Richard T. Ritenbaugh

New Transcripts

[**1820s: Attitudes of Returning to Egypt**](#)

Given by Jared M. Ellis on 31-May-25

[**1846A: The Bond of Perfection: Sacrifice**](#)

Given by Bill Onisick on 15-Nov-25

[**1847B: Caleb: Wholeheartedly Following God Exemplified**](#)

Given by Ted E. Bowling on 22-Nov-25

[**1848: Psalm Genres \(Part One\): Psalms of Thanksgiving**](#)

Given by Richard T. Ritenbaugh on 29-Nov-25

[**1854A: Sacrifice Dost Thou Want - Kindness**](#)

Given by Bill Onisick on 10-Jan-26

[**BS-PH09: Philippians \(Part Nine\)**](#)

Given by John W. Ritenbaugh on 03-Oct-89

From the Archives: Featured Sermon

[**Who Was Herbert W. Armstrong?**](#)

by John W. Ritenbaugh

Some fail to realize Herbert Armstrong's stabilizing role in God's church. The scattering we have experienced since his death has been a blessing from God, revealing our collective, pitiable spiritual deficits. God deliberately engineered the scattering to save us from our precarious spiritual condition. Like the virgins in the Parable of the Ten Virgins, we have all slumbered. In the meantime, God has been working on His spiritual creation, fashioning us in His image. At this juncture, we are not being scattered because of persecution, but because of punishment brought about by our wholesale lack of obedience, requiring loving, firm corrective action. We are not victims of Satan, but bear much of the responsibility for this dismantling from our

failure to discern false doctrine. The division of Israel and Judah (between Jeroboam and Rehoboam), occurring because of disobedience, was engineered by Almighty God, and was designed as a lesson for us. If we sin, God will scatter us. He who scatters the church will re-gather it in His good time. Herbert Armstrong, while not perfect, not infallible, and not sinless, nevertheless served as the custodian of the precious truths of God - occupying the role of God's servant and messenger. To reject the message from God's messenger is to reject God. We need to collectively repent and go back to the first works and the faith once delivered to the saints.

From the Archives: Featured Article

[Was Mr. Armstrong an Apostle?](#)

by John W. Ritenbaugh

Many have asked this question since the Worldwide Church of God began to break up. John Ritenbaugh explains what an apostle is and then checks to see how Herbert Armstrong measured up.

Featured Audio Schedule

Friday Night Bible Study

The next Bible Study (Friday 16-Jan-26) will be **Philippians (Part Nine)**, given by **John W. Ritenbaugh**. The Bible Study will be featured on the [CGG homepage](#) from **6:00 pm Friday** (EST) and all day Saturday.

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