



"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

30-Dec-05

Twenty Years On

It just occurred to me that January 16, 2006, will mark the twentieth 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, 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, it being 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 and 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 relay their sympathy.

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, the 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 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 the wearing of 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. Elements of this change were theologically correct, for instance, that [sin](#) is sin, no matter whether it is physical or spiritual in nature. However, the practical effect of the change was to remove faith from healing - and really, from anything else - to such an extent as to make it negligible. Once this major tenet of the church's teaching fell, others, like dominoes, were doomed also to fall. Soon, certain [Sabbath](#) teachings were loosened, hints of Trinitarianism began to bubble out of headquarters, and [the gospel](#) of the [Kingdom of God](#) 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 few years, 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. Twenty years on, it is seeking not even to be called the "Worldwide Church of God" any longer because, in the words of Joseph Tkach, Jr., "Our current name does not properly represent us." He is right. His organization does not deserve the name!

Notwithstanding such praise, Herbert Armstrong was a fallible man, and some would argue that he made many mistakes. He was not always right, even on doctrine. 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 of strong, deep instruction in God's way of life. In addition, his authoritarianism is legendary, but it was 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, collect what was necessary for understanding it, and explain it in simple 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 change 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

From the Archives: Featured Sermon

[What Is the Work of God Now? \(Part One\)](#)

by John W. Ritenbaugh

The preaching the gospel to the world, held by some to be the only identifying mark of the church, is at best the beginning of a long, complex process of creating disciples and godly offspring through steady feeding and encouragement to overcome (feeding the flock). God, as a responsible parent, is not one-dimensional in assigning responsibilities to His children, but frequently shifts gears, changing circumstances, giving His begotten children a well-rounded education. God - not Satan or an incompetent ministry - engineered the massive scattering of the church of God to move it away from pernicious and fatal Laodiceanism. We need to adjust to the new situation, realizing that God has engineered these events with the real work of God in mind: making man in His image and reproducing Himself.

From the Archives: Featured Article

[Was Herbert Armstrong a False Prophet?](#)

by Richard T. Ritenbaugh

Herbert Armstrong made scores of predictions, and many of them never came to pass. Does this make him a false prophet? Is he thus not worthy of following?

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