

INVESTIGATION OF ARMSTRONGISM

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Many cults arose throughout history, some even calling themselves Christian. Armstrongism and the Worldwide Church of God, established by Herbert W. Armstrong, is one of those cults. Because of the popularity of this church in the recent past and its influence in some areas of life today, this report will investigate the history, teachings, and heresies of Armstrongism. Beginning with its history and teaching, it will also discuss its major heresies and how to argue against those heresies by comparing them to heresies from the first century.

History and Basic Beliefs

Armstrongism began with the ministry of Herbert W. Armstrong in 1934. H. W. Armstrong was born to Quaker parents¹ in Des Moines, Iowa on July 31, 1892. He married his wife in the parsonage of Hyde Park Baptist Church in Chicago, Illinois.² Armstrong began a career in advertising as a copywriter for *The Merchants Trade Journal*, where he worked from 1912 to 1915. From 1915 through the late 1920's, Armstrong attempted to start three businesses, including his own advertising agency. All three ventures quickly ended in failure.³

¹ Joseph Tkach, *Transformed by Truth* (Sister: Multnomah Books, 1997), 168.

² Robert L. Sumner, *Armstrongism: The "Worldwide Church of God" Examined in the Searching Light of Scripture* (Brownsburg: Biblical Evangelical Press, 1974), 30.

³ Tkach, 169-171.

His venture into ministry began in 1926 when his wife joined a Seventh-day splinter cult called the “Church of God” and convinced him that Saturday is the Sabbath. In an attempt to prove her wrong, he became convinced that her beliefs were true. Armstrong was licensed as a minister in 1931 by the Oregon Conference of the Church of God (Seventh Day) and began his ministry by broadcasting over the radio on January 7, 1934. This ministry became the Worldwide Church of God. Over the next forty years, the Worldwide Church of God started three magazines, broadcast over three hundred radio stations and fifty television stations, started three colleges called Ambassador College, and maintained a budget of \$40 million per year,⁴ which, after inflation, is equivalent to about \$164,300,202.84 today.⁵

During the tenure of Herbert Armstrong, and his son, Garner Ted Armstrong, the Worldwide Church of God proclaimed various teachings regarding God, Christ Jesus, the Holy Spirit, salvation, and others. Each of these teachings is claimed to be based on the Bible, but actually stems from Armstrong’s personal view of hermeneutics, which states, “to interpret the Bible is to put your meaning into it—to twist it to mean what you want to make it mean, instead of what God made it to mean and wants you to understand.”⁶

⁴ Sumner, 22-32.

⁵ *Federal Reserve Bank Of Minneapolis*, "Consumer Price Index Calculator," <http://minneapolisfed.org/research/data/us/calc/> (accessed April 3, 2006).

⁶ Herbert W. Armstrong, *The Plain Truth* (Pasadena: Ambassador, Feb. 1963), 7; quoted in Sumner, 46.

Armstrongism taught that God was once like man in possessing a human form.⁷ It denies the Trinity, but teaches God exists as a god-family.⁸ This is based on the Hebrew word Elohim, which Armstrong says is “a uni-plural noun which reveals God to be a family.”⁹ Jesus was not the Son of God at His conception, but existed as part of the God family from all eternity as an inferior god.¹⁰ According to H. W. Armstrong, “in nature, He [Jesus] is equal with God the Father, though the Father is greater.”¹¹ The God the Father and God the Son are not the same. Jesus, according to Armstrongism, is the Yahweh God of the Old Testament, not the Father.¹² The Holy Spirit is not a person, but simply an “impersonal force” no different than air¹³ and the “germ by which we are begotten.”¹⁴

According to Armstrongism, God created man sinful and let him fall.

Salvation is a six-step process¹⁵ based on works and special knowledge¹⁶ that is only

⁷ Tkach, 91-92.

⁸ Interfaith Evangelism Team, "Interfaith Evangelism Belief Bulletin: Cults, Sects, And New Religious Movements - Armstrongism," *North American Mission Board*, February, 2004, http://www.namb.net/atf/cf/%7BCDA250E8-8866-4236-9A0C-C646DE153446%7D/043002_BB_Armstrongism_Web.pdf. (accessed February 26, 2006).

⁹ Paul N. Benware, *Ambassadors of Armstrongism* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1975), 41.

¹⁰ Sumner, 105.

¹¹ Benware, 45.

¹² Sumner, 102-104.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 117.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 160.

¹⁵ Joseph Hopkins, *The Armstrong Empire: A Look at the Worldwide Church of God* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1974), 118-119.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 128-129.

guaranteed to those who earn the right to be born again.¹⁷ This rebirth, though, only comes after the resurrection.¹⁸ This cult teaches that Jesus came only to show that the law, meaning the Ten Commandments could be followed.¹⁹ Jesus was not saved until he was born again after his resurrection.²⁰ When resurrected, man becomes spirit, just as Christ was only spiritually resurrected.²¹ Upon rebirth, man will become part of the God family, meaning man will become God²² and will be worshipped by other men just as Christ is worshipped.²³ Until this resurrection and subsequent rebirth occurs, after a man dies, his soul, which is not distinct from his body, remains asleep, a concept called “soul sleep.”²⁴

Herbert Armstrong believed God gave him a special understanding of the Bible and no other person since the apostle John taught the gospel correctly.²⁵ He claimed the Bible was written in code and hidden from the world.²⁶ He also claimed he was Elijah, or at least the new Elijah promised in Malachi 4:5-6.²⁷ Because of Armstrongism’s

¹⁷ Sumner, 125.

¹⁸ Bob Larson, *Larson's New Book of Cults* (Wheaton: Tyndale House, 1989), 470.

¹⁹ Tkach, 93.

²⁰ Sumner, 109.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 150.

²² Larson, 471.

²³ Sumner, 128.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 292-296.

²⁵ Roger C. Chambers, *The Plain Truth About Armstrongism* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1972), 16.

²⁶ Hopkins, 131.

²⁷ Sumner, 37-38.

legalistic interpretation and staunch requirement to uphold the Ten Commandments, Jewish festivals, and strict adherence to the Jewish Sabbath, Armstrongism has been called “baptized Judaism.”²⁸

The final major teaching of Armstrongism is the concept of the United States and Britain being the ten lost tribes of Israel, a view called British-Israelism²⁹ or Anglo-Israelism. This teaching, though, was not unique to H. W. Armstrong, but originated with Richard Brothers in 1790.³⁰ According to Armstrong, the Davidic throne always existed since David’s death. He stated the throne replanted itself in Ireland, Scotland, and then London, is now held by Queen Elizabeth, and that Christ will sit on the British throne upon his return.³¹

The cult Armstrong founded changed dramatically in recent years.

Christianity Today stated in 2003 that, “ten years ago, the leaders in the Worldwide Church of God (WCG) began denouncing the fringe beliefs of their founder and transforming their church into an evangelical denomination.”³² Under the leadership of Joseph Tkach and others, this church adopted orthodox Christian doctrine. In May 1997, the National Association of Evangelicals accepted the Worldwide Church of God as a

²⁸ Charles F. DeLoach, *The Armstrong Error* (Plainfield: Logos International, 1971), 18-19.

²⁹ Sumner, 239.

³⁰ Stanley E. Anderson, *Armstrongism's 300 Errors Exposed by 1300 Bible Verses* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1975), 75.

³¹ Noel Smith, *Herbert W. Armstrong and His World Tomorrow* (Springfield: Baptist Bible Tribune, 1964), 36.

³² Marshall Allen, "Doctrinal Aftershocks," *Christianity Today*, July, 2003, 22.

member and the Worldwide Church of God endorsed the Association's statement of faith.³³

Specific Heretical Beliefs

Though some claim "Armstrong's church incorporated fundamental teachings of the Old and New Testaments,"³⁴ even the most cursory examination reveals the church's teachings are more heretical than fundamental. Close examination reveals nearly every doctrinal teaching is heretical with only a glimmer of truth. The basis of all the heretical teachings of the church is Armstrong's incorrect view of scripture, the Godhead, and salvation. It is these three teachings that will be discussed here.

Scripture. Armstrong taught that God wrote the Bible in a code, hidden from all people, until God chose him to teach the coded Bible to the world. He claims that he, alone, discovered the "'key' that opens the Bible to human understanding."³⁵ Combining this with his personal view of how to interpret scripture and the numerous recorded Biblical misinterpretations, or reinterpretations, Armstrong holds a low view of scripture and a higher view of his personal opinions regarding the Bible.

The Godhead. Herbert Armstrong proclaimed God as not a single, unified Godhead, but a god-family possessing multiple gods, which is polytheism. His view that Jesus is both the God of the Old Testament, is God now, but needed to be saved in between devalues Christ to either a mutable god or a god that somehow lost his deity. In

³³ Tkach, *Transformed by Truth*. Un-numbered section in back titled "Statement of Faith, National Association of Evangelicals."

³⁴ "Events and People," *The Christian Century* 103, no. 4 (January 29 1986): 88.

³⁵ Chambers, 16.

either case, Jesus required God selecting him to receive divinity after his resurrection and is no longer a member of the Trinitarian Godhead. According to Armstrong, “Jesus qualified to become this world's ruler by conquering Satan the evil one. His human birth was the arrival of the ‘second Adam.’ He had come to qualify, where the first Adam failed.”³⁶ His view of Christ, depending on which article or broadcast is studied, varies so greatly and is so confusing, determining exactly what Armstrong believed about Christ is difficult. An example of his double-speak about Christ is seen in this confusing statement:

The Word, then, is a Personage who was made flesh - begotten by God, who through this later begettal became his Father. So here we find revealed originally two Personages. One is God. But these two Personages were spirit, which is invisible to human eyes unless supernaturally manifested. Yet at the time described in verse one Jesus was not the Son of God and God was not his Father.³⁷

Not only does Armstrong redefine God the Father and Jesus as a polytheistic duo in which one adopted the other, he also denies the personage of the Holy Spirit. He sees the Spirit as nothing more than “a divine, spiritual love.”³⁸ Such a view is seen as ditheism, a view of only two members of the Godhead, which was condemned as a heresy by early church fathers.³⁹

Salvation. Herbert Armstrong taught two critical errors regarding salvation. First, salvation is a process by which man earns the ability to spend eternity in heaven.

³⁶ Gary A. Hand, "Herbert W. Armstrong," *On Doctrine*, 2001, <http://www.ondoctrine.com/10armsth.htm>. (accessed February 26, 2006).

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Charles L. Manske and Daniel N. Harnelink, *World Religions Today: Comparative Outlines of Contemporary Faiths Around the World* (Irvine: Institute of World Religions, 1996), 63.

³⁹ Edward Rocie Hardy, ed., *The Library of Christian Classics*, vol. 3, *Christology of the Later Fathers* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1954), 202.

Second, upon being born again, man will become God. Regarding works-based salvation, Armstrong spent much time denying he taught such doctrine. In one instance, Armstrong stated, “your ‘works’ won’t get you converted—won’t earn you God’s Spirit—won’t earn salvation—as I have made plain in this article. But, the lack of good works can get you lost, if persisted in.” Sumner summarizes this statement as proving works-based salvation saying, “he is saying that grace will ‘introduce’ you to Christ, but from there on, it is up to you.”⁴⁰ Sumner also noted Armstrong argued against his own denial of works-based salvation when he said, “to be ‘saved’—to inherit eternal life in God’s Kingdom—you must still be traveling that way [a good life] at the end of your life!”⁴¹

Regarding man becoming God, various authors state scripture, understood correctly, argues against such a false teaching. The idea man can become like God, or become God himself, needs little qualification to be seen as heretical. Some arguments against this teaching will be included in the final section of this report.

Comparison to First Century Heresies

One could rightfully view Herbert Armstrong as the heretic’s heretic because his teachings pulled from Jehovah’s Witnesses, Mormonism, Seventh-Day Adventists, Christian Scientists, Judaism, Ebionites, and many others.⁴² Investigation of his beliefs show a very close comparison to the heresy of dynamic monarchianism, or simply, Adoptionism. This teaching states, basically, that “Jesus is a man endowed with a special

⁴⁰ Sumner, 150.

⁴¹ Ibid., 146.

power from God.”⁴³ Though Hopkins mentions a similarity to Gnosticism, and while some of Armstrong’s teachings do lend themselves to this heresy, this is a small aspect of his teachings. Adoptionism is the dominant heresy of Herbert W. Armstrong.

As stated earlier, Armstrong believed that Jesus always existed with God as a lower God, and is even Yahweh of the Old Testament. However, after his birth, Jesus was simply a man who came only to show the law could be kept. Jesus was not the Son of God at his conception,⁴⁴ but only became the Son of God at his birth.⁴⁵ Jesus possessed a sin nature; though Armstrong claims Jesus never sinned. Furthermore, Jesus was born again after his resurrection, having achieved his salvation by his works. These teachings are very similar to the ancient teaching of Adoptionism.

Early Arguments Against First Century Heresies

The first recorded propagator of Adoptionism is Theodotus of Byzantium.⁴⁶ Some place its origin in Rome around A.D. 190, partly as a response to Gnosticism. Adoptionism never became a major force in the first centuries of the church, though it did gain a wide following beginning in the early 1800s.⁴⁷

Despite its lack of popularity, this heresy did claim one major disciple in Paul of Samosata (ca. 200-275), the bishop of Antioch. Paul taught that Jesus was born of a

⁴² DeLoach, 18.

⁴³ Harold O. J. Brown, *Heresies* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1988), 95-96.

⁴⁴ Sumner, 105.

⁴⁵ Benware, 44.

⁴⁶ Newman, Albert Henry, *A Manual of Church History, Ancient and Mediaeval Church History (To A. D. 1517)* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1933), 198.

⁴⁷ Brown, 96-97.

virgin and the Holy Spirit was poured out upon him at his baptism. While he did refer to Jesus as God, he referred to Jesus' "moral perfection" and the powers granted to him at his baptism which allowed him to remain in constant union with God.

Because it never gained a widespread following, Adoptionism was not highly debated. Two major councils—Nicea in 325 and Chalcedon in 451—countered the small-time heresy by simply affirming Christ's deity.⁴⁸ Two minor councils were formed in Antioch to force Paul of Samosata to stop teaching the heresy.⁴⁹ Also, two slogans, Irenaeus' "God made man" and Tertullian's "true God and true man" are credited for having "swept Adoptionism from the stage."⁵⁰

Three major arguments rose to counter Adoptionism in the early church from Gregory of Nazianzus, the second Antioch council, and Alcuin of Britain. Gregory of Nazianzus, while arguing against Apollinarianism, offered an argument against ditheism. He affirmed the trinity and described it this way:

The Father is the begetter and the emitter; without passion, of course, and without reference to time, and not in a corporeal manner. The son is the begotten, and the Holy Ghost is the emission.⁵¹

Gregory also affirmed the triune Godhead as one God and one Godhead, saying, "all that proceeds from him is referred as one," though in three persons. One person is not more and another less God; one is not before and another after. He uses the illustration of seeing one bright light that comes from multiple suns. The light, which is one essence, is

⁴⁸ Brown, 97-98.

⁴⁹ González, Justo L, *A History of Christian Thought, From the Beginning to the Council of Chalcedon* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1970), 251.

⁵⁰ Brown, 97-98.

⁵¹ Hardy, 161.

the Godhead and each sun is the person in which the Godhead dwells. The strongest argument made by Gregory, though, is his call for ditheists to do as they claim. He states that ditheists claim to hold firmly to scripture while at the same time arguing against God's word. He calls for them to truly hold to God's word.⁵²

The second council of Antioch rejected Paul of Samosata's use of the word ὁμοούσιος, meaning "consubstantial," which he used to claim the Word of John 1:1 had no subsistence of its own. They claimed the orthodox teaching of the Son and the Father maintaining the same essence is the Biblical viewpoint, not Paul's. Noteworthy, though, is the Council of Nicea, in 325, used this same Greek word, but in a different sense, and sparked debate as to whether or not the Council actually adopted Paul's Adoptionism.⁵³

Alcuin, a British prelate and educator, accused those accepting Adoptionism of practicing Nestorianism because they separated the divinity of Christ from the humanity of Christ. He argued that Jesus, though like us in many things, in most things he was not like us. He reinterpreted scripture to argue that Jesus never prayed for himself or his disciples, because being divine, was capable of providing whatever blessing was needed to his followers. The prayers of Jesus in which he seems to pray for himself or others are simply Jesus doing something for effect, not substance. He also stated Christ is not merely human, or a man in unity with God, but is in fact, a God-man. Alcuin stated God the Son took on the form of man, but that Jesus remained eternally God by nature.

⁵² Hardy, 202-204.

⁵³ González, 251-252.

Alcuin's argument is based on a strong emphasis on the deity of Christ and nearly de-humanizes Jesus.⁵⁴

Arguments Against Armstrongism

Based on both the argumentations of those who abandoned the false teachings of Herbert W. Armstrong and the arguments made by early apologists, one concludes the best way to debate Armstrongism is to point to scripture itself. Following the advice offered by Gregory of Nazianzus, one must hold strongly to a correct interpretation of scripture, especially since Armstrongism uses the Bible exclusively. While Herbert and Garner Ted Armstrong's teachings were deemed equal to the Bible, they never presided over scripture.⁵⁵ Rather, they leaned heavily upon the Bible, albeit a very flawed understanding of scripture.

There are many scriptures that deal with every aspect of the original teachings of the Worldwide Church of God. Rather than outlining every possible argument against all teachings, this report will highlight the major arguments against the three major false teachings of Armstrongism: scriptural authority, Jesus' identity, and salvation.

Scriptural Authority. The second letter Paul wrote to Timothy states,

You, however, continue in the things you have learned and become convinced of, knowing from whom you have learned them, and that from childhood you have known the sacred writings which are able to give you the wisdom that leads to salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work. (2 Tim. 3:14-17, NASB)⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Newman, 358.

⁵⁵ Sumner, 40.

⁵⁶ Scripture quotations taken from the New American Standard Bible® unless noted. Copyright

It is clear from Paul's letters that Timothy had learned scripture and was to apply them. In fact, Paul states scripture is God's word to man and is given with a specific purpose: "so that the man of God may be adequate." In order for this objective to be reached, the Bible must be understood by Timothy. Also, that which is understood must be God's meaning, not man's, otherwise God's purpose would not be achieved, but man's.

Jesus instructed those around him on the Mount of Olives to make disciples, teaching others to obey all that Christ commanded them (Matt. 28:19). While Herbert may claim this happened up until A.D. 69 and ceased until he began teaching, such an understanding is hollow in light of other passages. Paul also wrote to Timothy saying, "this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who *desires all men to be saved* and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (1 Tim. 2:3-4, emphasis added). Since God desires all men to be saved, and because "faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ," (Rom. 10:17) meaning the preaching of the word, it can only be seen that God wanted all those people from the fall of Jerusalem until Herbert Armstrong's ministry to be saved. God desired all those people to hear the word of God, so it is not likely God would hide that which is needed to fulfill God's plan. This concept of preaching the gospel is also found in the Old Testament, a favorite of H. W. Armstrong. Deuteronomy 6:6-7a states, "These words, which I am commanding you today, shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your sons." God instructs His people to always teach His word, so it stands He would not revoke that rule after the fall of the Temple.

Jesus' Identity. John 1:1 states the Word was God. It is also clear that it was through the Word, Jesus, that all things were created. Also, God said, "Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness" and so "God created man in His own image" (Gen. 1:26-27). These text clearly show that Jesus preexisted the creation of man, and that God created man, though Christ, in His own image. If Jesus was merely human, he could not have created mankind.

Regarding the idea of Jesus belonging to a God-family as one of many gods, or potential gods, Moses told the Hebrews, "Hear, O Israel! Yahweh is our God, Yahweh alone" (Deut. 6:4, personal translation of the Hebrew text). Whether translated "one," "alone," or "only" as some versions translate this text, the idea is there is only one God, and that God is Yahweh. If Christ was a god who belonged to a family of gods, then Yahweh would not be the only God. Also, the Hebrew texts clearly states יהוה אלהינו (Yēhwâh Ēlōhênû), meaning Yahweh is our God, followed by יהוה אחד, which means, Yahweh is one, or Yahweh alone. This clearly states that Yahweh (Jesus according to Armstrongism) is Elohim, and only Yahweh is Elohim. In other words, if Jesus is Yahweh, then Jesus is the only God and there is no other God. For Elohim to be a God-family with Jesus as a member, this verse cannot be true. Furthermore, Exodus 20:5a states, "you shall not worship them [other gods or idols] or serve them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God." The phrase, "the LORD" is Yahweh in Hebrew. So, based on Jesus being Yahweh, Jesus is commanding us to worship only him and not God the Father or other men who become gods in the so-called God-family.

Salvation. The Bible is full of texts showing God's grace in salvation. Beginning with God's clothing Adam and Even in Genesis 3:21 rather than killing them

and culminating with Christ dying on the cross and raising back up, God is continually showing mercy to His people. Scripture, in context of the whole Bible, makes it clear God is the actor in salvation and man does nothing to attain God's favor. Jesus said God loved us so much that He sent His son to die so that we might live (John 3:16). Isaiah 53:6 states that God "caused the iniquity of us all to fall on him [the Messiah]." Paul writes, "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast" (Eph. 2:8-9). Paul states "by grace you have been saved in verse 5 of that same chapter. It is clear salvation comes as a work of God, not of man. If man could do anything to earn salvation, then Christ died in vain. For if our works were good enough, then Christ needed not die. Moses directs the people, "you shall not sacrifice to the LORD your God an ox or a sheep which has a blemish or any defect, for that is a detestable thing to the LORD your God" (Deut. 17:1). God required a completely unblemished animal for sacrifice because any blemish is not good enough. Under the same requirement, man is blemished by sin. God still requires an unblemished sacrifice to pay for our sins. If one could earn salvation by our works, then one's blemished self is good enough. This is not so. Only Jesus' unblemished sacrifice is good enough.

Regarding the idea of losing salvation, this is impossible, based on scripture.

Jesus said,

My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me; and I give eternal life to them, and they will never perish; and no one will snatch them out of My hand. My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand. I and the Father are one. (John 10:27-30)

Also, Paul wrote, "In Him, you also, after listening to the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation—having also believed, you were sealed in Him with the Holy Spirit of

promise” (Eph. 1:13). Based on these verses, it is clear that man cannot break that which God holds; man is not stronger than God. Also, it is the Holy Spirit that seals man’s salvation, not man. Only Christ is able to break that seal (cf. Rev. 5).

Conclusion

Armstrongism, as taught by Herbert W. and Garner Ted Armstrong and all those who follow their teachings, is a cult. It is not a Christian organization, but a sect that teaches heretical doctrines. The beliefs of this cult are not new, but stem from heresies found in the early church period. In order to defend and correct the teachings, one need be knowledgeable of scripture and “accurately handling the word of truth” (2 Tim. 2:15). Christians must understand what God wants them to know so that they are ready “in season and out of season” to “reprove, rebuke, exhort, with great patience and instruction” (2 Tim. 4:2). Those who follow Armstrong’s teachings depend greatly on scripture, so as believers, Christians must “always be ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence” (1 Peter 3:15).

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