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Grace Communion International

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mainstream evangelicalism prodded him to engage in fellowship at other spiritual venues such as the Church of God (Seventh Day) in Salem, Oregon, where he was issued a ministerial license in 1931 (a credential later revoked over doctrinal disputes). It was not long before he began preaching to and leading small groups of what became a growing following. Eventually, around 1934 a radio program was launched. Initially called *The Radio Church of God*, it later became known as *The World Tomorrow*. *The Plain Truth* magazine became yet another wide-reaching vehicle for disseminating his ideas.

As the radio program continued to prosper, Armstrong moved to California in 1947 to be closer to the hub of the radio business. The founding of Ambassador College soon followed, filling the need in large part for a training ground for future church leadership. The church enjoyed a steady growth climb throughout the 1950s and 1960s. Largely through the popular radio broadcast the church continued to gain adherents and plant churches on a global scale.

It was during this period that the church changed its name to “Worldwide Church of God.”

However, it was in the 1970s that the church experienced a downturn in growth. Numerous factors played into this decline. A series of highly publicized prophetic predictions of Christ’s return failed to be fulfilled. Personnel issues, including a major fallout with his son Garner Ted Armstrong over moral improprieties and doctrinal disputes leading to the latter’s “disfellowshipping” in 1978, exacerbated the decline. In addition, a few minor doctrinal changes instituted by the elder Armstrong himself had an unsettling effect on some of his followers, leading them to lose confidence in his credibility as an infallible teacher of the Bible.

Nevertheless, the church weathered the slowdown and continued to grow until his death in 1986. Shortly before his death, Armstrong designated Joseph Tkach Sr., a trusted church administrator, to carry on the ministry, which Tkach did until his own death in 1995. The gauntlet of leadership was then passed on to his son Joseph Tkach Jr., who continues to serve the church as its president and pastor general.

Throughout his ministry Armstrong’s charismatic communication style and dogged insistence on the accuracy of his teachings both attracted avid followers and stirred up virulent criticism. His stance on numerous doctrinal issues set him at odds with orthodox Protestant as well as Catholic teachings, both of which he considered deceitful defections from Scriptural truths revealed to him from God. Yet posturing himself as God’s apostle (eventually understanding his authority as on a par with the original apostles), he unhesitatingly regarded the Worldwide Church of God as the one true church, in light of which all others could only be considered apostate. While earnestly striving to believe and teach what the Bible says, unencumbered by illegitimate encrustations from tradition, he was hampered by his lack of seminary training, knowledge of the original biblical languages and hermeneutic tools. This educational gap ironically led to widespread criticism of major portions of his teaching as unbiblical distortions, unbalanced and ill-informed.

GRACE COMMUNION INTERNATIONAL

While this denomination has only been known as Grace Communion International since April 2009, it represents the radical metamorphosis of a movement that began in Oregon in the 1930s under the leadership of Herbert Armstrong. As his autobiography attests, this young newspaper advertising designer experienced a life-changing conversion to faith in Jesus Christ in the 1920s that ignited within him an “unspeakable joy” and ravenous appetite to study the Bible. The more he learned, the more compelled he became to share his insights with others by writing articles. But by the mid- to late-20s a growing disenchantment with

Laced throughout Armstrong's teachings was a strong emphasis on old covenant concepts and regulations. Obedience to God was paramount in his thinking. Sabbath-keeping on the seventh day was an inviolable commandment; thus, the vast majority of Christian denominations that shifted their central worship time to Sunday were engaging in unbiblical tampering, as he saw it. Furthermore, Armstrong put great stock in observing seven annual Sabbaths, deriving from Leviticus 23, which imposed strict dietary regulations as well as mandating three required tithes to be collected from the people. While Jesus' divinity was not denied, it was God the Father as Lawgiver who received greater emphasis. Right standing with God came to revolve more around rule-keeping than on grace. This extended to matters of contemporary lifestyle, placing prohibitions on use of cosmetics (expression of vanity), voting in elections, military service, remarriage following divorce, seeking medical help (failure of faith reliance on God), and observing Christmas, Easter and birthdays (capitulation to secular pagan feast days).

In addition, the Trinity, a mainstay of orthodox traditional Christianity, was vigorously repudiated. Lacking the theological sophistication to understand how to conceive of Jesus and the Father as divine and yet one God, he spoke of God as a family of two separate beings. Unable to see biblical justification for regarding the Spirit as a distinct person, he spoke of it as an impersonal force.

Prophecy played a major role in Armstrong's teachings. Predictions pinpointing the onslaught of the Great Tribulation and the Second Coming of Jesus to institute a 1000-year millennial rule figure prominently in his teaching. A particularly contentious offshoot was his firmly held conviction that Britain and the United States (not the contemporary nation-state of Israel) comprised the "lost tribes of Israel," and as such were the legitimate heirs to many Old Testament prophecies. This "Anglo-Israelism" fueled the necessity for reinstating seventh day Sabbath-keeping, for Armstrong believed that rekindling that Old Testament observance was vital in helping the "lost tribe" Anglo descendants recover their identity as the true Christians.

With the leadership shift to Joseph Tkach Sr. in 1986 came a growing unease with some of the doctrinal positions formerly espoused. Taking seriously Armstrong's exhortation to be utterly faithful to adhere to biblical truth, the leadership embarked on a reexamination of church teachings and began to come to the painful conclusion that numerous teachings were based on inadequate understandings of Scripture. Various books by Armstrong were taken out of circulation and needed doctrinal changes began to be instituted. This reexamination process accelerated with the shift of leadership to Joseph Tkach Jr. upon his father's death in 1995.

A prime impetus for doctrinal revision was the validation of the doctrine of the Trinity as not only biblically warranted but indispensable to a proper understanding of biblical revelation. In place of seeing God primarily in legal terms as Lawgiver demanding obedience as a fundamental

criterion for salvation, which tended to spawn legalism and judgmentalism, God was now rediscovered as the One God who exists in loving communion as Father, Son and Spirit. Rather than privileging Law over grace, church leaders became invigorated by the rediscovery of the relevance of the new covenant. There they found the emphasis swung away from reliance on human efforts at rule-keeping. Rather, the central focus shifted dramatically to the holy love of the Triune God coming personally to do for human beings what they were helpless to effect for themselves. Whereas Jesus' role had previously been seen primarily as a messenger proclaiming the Kingdom of God as a purely future event, he began to be seen as the central focus of the message itself, not merely the model human teacher showing persons how to keep the Law, but "Reconciler, Savior and Friend." Being fully divine and fully human, Jesus is uniquely the saving Creator God revealed to the world. At the same time he is also the Second Adam through whose humanity this same Creator God was representing and recreating a new humanity in which persons could participate by faith in the eternal communion of Father, Son and Spirit and experience new life under God's liberating reign.

Discarding the legalistic orientation of Armstrong's teachings in light of this new renaissance of teachings centered on Jesus Christ as the window through which to see and encounter the Triune God of grace has enabled Grace Communion International to reconnect with other Christian denominations in ways inconceivable during the Armstrong era. Membership in the National Association of Evangelicals as well as other ecumenical organizations reflects the recognition it has gained and continues to garner as a movement reflecting orthodox Christian beliefs today.

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