

The Empire Builders: Herbert W. and Garner Ted Armstrong

Legal battles, controversy, defections and old age have not dampened Herbert W. Armstrong's spirits. Last year (1981), a series of 10 full-page ads in 14 large Canadian daily papers drew the attention of millions of readers.

They featured the 89-year old Herbert W. Armstrong (HWA), pastor-general of the Worldwide Church of God (WCG), and presented his views on contemporary national and international problems. Full-page ads in such national magazines as *Reader's Digest* and *TV Guide* invite readers to request a free subscription to *Plain Truth*.

This propaganda organ of the WCG is given away in most major railway stations and airports throughout Europe. Its slick appearance attracts a wide readership. Armstrong's religious empire has branch headquarters in Canada, South Africa, Australia, Philippines, West Germany, Switzerland, England, Sweden, Norway, Denmark and Holland.

How long will Armstrong's scandal-ridden empire be able to survive? HWA is getting old. But age doesn't matter. Gerald Waterhouse, the leading preacher in HWA's WCG says that Armstrong will live until the end of the world. "God is able to keep him alive for one million years in the flesh," he proclaims.

For years, WCG presented a united front. Armstrong's authority was not questioned. In the mid 70's, his empire showed serious cracks. The points of conflict were numerous. Ministers lived in luxury, while membership suffered poverty. Church members were forbidden to seek medical help, and when they did they were accused of lacking faith. HWA's life-style and reputation have been questioned in two controversial books written by former WCG members.

WCG officials Sherwin McMichael and Henry Cornwall secured a court order to halt distribution of one of these: David Robinson's *Herbert Armstrong's Tangled Web*. It contains damaging charges, such as Armstrong's alleged shocking sexual behaviour. Robinson, however, appealed and the ruling was overturned.

HWA has a real flair for publicity. He loves getting invitations from "the high and the mighty." A few years ago, HWA got the red-carpet treatment in China after donating \$500,000 in books to Chinese libraries. In 1979, HWA and Stanley Rader, WCG's general counsel, met with President Sadat. There, they presented the President with \$100,000 of the \$1 million pledged for Sadat's \$70 million interfaith centre at the base of Mount Sanai. Afterwards, they flew to Jerusalem to meet with Prime Minister Begin.

In 1978, there was a well publicized rift between HWA and his son Garner Ted. Garner Ted was expelled from the WCG and went to Tyler, Texas, where he founded his own Church of God, International. In 1980, this new church claimed 70 congregations with a membership of about 3,000. HWA still had about 68,000 worldwide (50,000 U.S.).

HWA's program "World Tomorrow" can be heard on 100 radio and 81 television stations in Canada. In the U.S. the sect has dropped from 350 radio and 100 television stations to about 50 radio and 60 television stations. Garner Ted's program is carried on some 50 U.S. radio stations. And his new church has already experienced defections by several key leaders.

Extravagance

HWA is a lavish spender. While church leaders indulge, members sacrifice. According to court documents, HWA spent \$44,000 for a one-week stay in a Paris hotel and purchased \$5,000 worth of Steuben crystal in Switzerland, using church funds. An article in *Time magazine* (May 15, 1972) mentioned: "Former members charge that the Armstrongs live like kings while members often live in poverty to pay their tithes. They maintain that each of the two Armstrongs has elegant homes in Texas, California and England; that Herbert sports a \$1,000 watch."

Despite all the adverse publicity, HWA still maintains that his WCG is the only true church. There is no salvation outside of it. He says: "Yes, this work is the work of the true church of God. All others are satanic counterfeits! It is time we come out from among them and become separate."

The WCG states, without any apology: "Only the Worldwide Church of God has the truth, the truth the whole world will one day be forced to agree to. You're on the winning team!"

What are the marks of a genuine church according to HWA's theology? There are seven of them:

1. The observance of the Sabbath on Saturday instead of Sunday.
2. The observance of the Passover and other Jewish feasts.
3. The compliance with the Old Testament dietary laws that forbid eating pork and other "unclean" foods.
4. The rejection of belief in the doctrine of the Trinity.
5. Adult baptism by immersion, valid only if administered by a "true minister of the true Church."
6. Non-involvement in secular governments.
7. The use of the term "Church of God."

In true sect style, HWA's authority may not be questioned. Waterhouse, a friend of the self-styled "Only Apostle of God for the 20th century," says: "Using your reason to question Herbert W. Armstrong is disobedience. To reason is to fall into Satan's trap. Don't follow your feelings either; be obedient." He also says that criticism of HWA and Stanley Rader is "criticism of Jesus Christ and the Plan for the end times. It's the closest thing to unpardonable sin."

Success story

Who is this persuasive HWA? He was born in Des Moines, Iowa, in 1892. His parents were Quakers. His religious pilgrimage led him from Quakerism, Methodism, to the Church of God (Seventh Day), which was an off-shoot of the Church of God (Adventist), which was an off-shoot of the Seventh Day Adventist Church. He claims to have been converted in 1927.

He gave up his advertising business, was ordained by the Church of God in 1933 and engaged in evangelistic work in Oregon. He was soon in trouble with his church over his views in prophecy and his strange ideas gained from the British Israelites. He was expelled from his church.

In January 1934, he began a regular radio program on a small 100 watt station in Oregon. This was the beginning of a tremendous success story, and the birth of the Radio Church of God (now WCG).

In the same year, HWA published the first edition of *The Plain Truth* - 250 mimeographed copies. The issue was entitled, "*Is a World Dictator about to appear?*" This is typical HWA style!

In 1947, HWA started his Ambassador College, which had until recently three campuses - in California, Texas and England. The recent troubles forced the closure of the campus in England, and, in 1977, the campus in Texas was also shut down. HWA, though he lacked a high school diploma, served as chancellor of the California Campus, which once had 1,600 students, and a Bible correspondence school which mailed out some 80,000 lessons each month.

HWA doesn't permit the forming of new congregations unless a graduate from the Ambassador College can serve as a minister. To keep a close tab on his members, the church meetings are not open to the general public. To attend you must have a special invitation approved by the minister.

A frequent complaint about HWA was his dictatorial control over the church's faith and practice. Until 1974, divorced remarried persons who joined the WCG had to break up their marriages. This changed when HWA married a church secretary, who was a divorcee and nearly half his age. His first wife had died in 1967, a few months before their golden wedding anniversary.

Many members also disputed HWA's view on the correct day to celebrate Pentecost, and some other beliefs. Because of their complaints, new rules for the church were announced in 1976. Voting in elections are now allowed; and so are birthday celebrations and inter-racial marriages. But, the basic doctrines remained untouched.

Is Herbert W. Armstrong (HWA) a fanatical seeker after truth? Nothing of that sort! He has brewed his own religious concoction. He borrowed ideas from British-Israelism, Seventh Day Adventism, Jehovah's Witnesses, and the Mormons.

According to British- Israelism, the ten lost tribes of Israel are the forerunners of the British and the Americans. England is the Israel of the Bible.

HWA says that "prophecies were never given to, and did not pertain to ancient Israel. Most of them pertain directly to the United States and British nations!" And he maintains, with the British Israel theory, that Queen Elizabeth II actually "sits on the throne of King David of Israel."

There is, of course, no Biblical or historical evidence to support such weird notions. With the Seventh Day Adventists, HWA insists on the observance of the Sabbath instead of the Lord's Day.

In strong language he says: "Sunday observance - this is the Mark of the Beast. If you are branded this mark, rejecting the sign of God (the Sabbath) in your forehead and your hand, you shall be tormented by God's plagues without mercy. Yes, you!"

HWA is extremely legalistic with his insistence on the observance of the Jewish feast days, new moons, festivals and sabbaths. He also expects his members not only to contribute a tithe to his church, but also a second 10 per cent to finance church festivals, and, every third year, the WCG members are expected to donate 30 per cent of their income. The norm is 20 per cent for the intervening years.

With the Jehovah's Witnesses, HWA is radically anti-Trinitarian. He teaches that the Trinity is a doctrine that originated from the devil. His view of Christ is heretical. HWA has said: "Jesus alone, of all humans has so far been saved. By the resurrection power of God... He was the first human ever to achieve it - to be perfected, finished as a perfect character."

Salvation

Salvation is not through the finished work of Christ on the cross. HWA says: "The blood of Christ does not finally save any man. The death of Christ merely paid the penalty of sin in our stead - it wipes the slate clean of past sins - it saves us merely from the death penalty - it removes that which separated us from God and reconciles us to God."

Christians are not saved as yet; they are in the process of being saved. When you are converted, you are merely beginning salvation. You are placed under the government of God. Only people who keep the Old Testament laws all their life will be born again when Jesus returns to earth.

HWA says: "That tremendous glorious event of being born of God is to take place at the resurrection of the just - at the time of Christ's Second Coming to earth!" Who then are saved? "Only those who, during this Christian, Spirit begotten life, have grown in knowledge and grace, have overcome, have developed spiritually, done the works of Christ, and endured unto the end, who shall finally be given immortality - finally changed from mortal to immortal at the time of the Second Coming of Christ."

From Mormonism, HWA adopted the idea that God is a "family," including the Father, Jesus Christ, and the spiritual sons who also become divine. Man can become gods. "Do you really grasp it? The purpose of your being alive is that finally you be born into the Kingdom of God, when you will actually be God, even as Jesus was and is God, and His Father, a different Person, also is God! You are setting out on a training to become creator - to become God!"

God's prophet

HWA believes that he alone has received a divine mandate. He is God's 20th century prophet. He is His chosen mouthpiece for the end times. According to him, Jesus Christ died in 31 B.C., and for two 19-year cycles the original apostles did proclaim the gospel, but in 69 A.D. they fled.

Now Armstrong also has been given two 19-year cycles. His first began in 1934, and ended in 1953. His second was supposed to have concluded with the return of Christ on January 7, 1972.

Says HWA: "Today Christ has raised up His work and once again allotted two 19 year time cycles for proclaiming His same Gospel, preparatory to His Second Coming ... *The World Tomorrow* and *The Plain Truth* are Christ's Instruments which He is powerfully using. Yes, His message is shocking today. Once again it is the voice in the wilderness of religious confusion!" HWA's calculations have proven to be wrong. Since 1937, HWA has actually predicted three different dates for Christ's return.

Why do Armstrong's broadcasts have such an audience and his literature such readership? HWA and Garner Ted teach a number of truths. They believe in the infallibility and the authority of Scriptures. They debunk the theory of evolution. They stress law and order and a God-centred family life. They sound convinced of their message. Their promotional material is slick. Their message is attractive to many who are dissatisfied with what they regard as the loss of authority and erosion of belief in mainline churches.

Armstrongism has all the answers! When people hear such truths, and with the current fascination with the signs of the times, many become convinced that everything Armstrongism teaches is true. And for the faithful, persecution and ridicule appear in the light of the promised benefits in the coming Utopia, and their place in it, but a momentary affliction. The burdens of the present are easy to bear when the future holds such wonderful glory in store for the Church of God.

Will Herbert Armstrong survive the unfavourable publicity, loss of ministers and the departure of the popular Garner Ted? Will Garner Ted be able to carve out a lasting empire for himself?

I don't believe so. The narrow and despotic vision of the true church, that began in 1933, will evaporate. Church history is filled with examples of sects that made a big

splash, but lasted no longer than a generation. The Christ of the Scriptures will remain. His church will prevail and His Kingdom will come.

Johan D. Tangelder
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