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THE PRICE OF CHANGE: A FOLLOW-UP ON THE WORLDWIDE CHURCH OF GOD

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The Worldwide Church of God (WCG) began its voyage into the pale of mainstream Christianity nearly two decades ago. Its continuing journey is remarkable, as are the splinter groups that left the WCG to remain true to the teachings of WCG founder Herbert W. Armstrong.

The End of the WCG as We Knew It. The WCG changed dramatically under the leadership of Joseph Tkach, Sr., and Joseph Tkach, Jr. In its online historical account the WCG indicates that it first abandoned prohibitions against visiting doctors, receiving medication, and celebrating birthdays (1988), then rejected Armstrong's teaching on the New Birth (which involved being born into divinity/becoming divine in the resurrection) and affirmed the Bible's teaching on the divinity of the Holy Spirit (1991) and on the Trinity (1993). The WCG further declared that members did not have to obey Old Testament ceremonial commands related to diet and Jewish holidays (1994). It later rejected the belief that Anglos are literal descendants of Abraham and allowed members to celebrate Christian holidays (1995).

The WCG lost members and income during these tumultuous years. Attendance was at its greatest in 1990 (133,000 each week), but membership and income began to decrease steadily in 1991. It currently reports around 64,000 members in 860 churches.

The WCG has closed its three college and one university campuses. Prominent WCG leader J. Michael Fezell, author of *Liberation of the Worldwide Church of God* (Zondervan, 2001), indicates that the WCG recently "sold all of its Pasadena property and is in the process of relocating its headquarters to Glendora, California."

New WCG Initiatives. The WCG's losses have not weakened its resolve. "Many [congregations] have begun to add new members and plant new churches as they reach out evangelistically in their communities," says Fezell. He notes that the WCG has experienced its greatest growth in the Philippines and Africa where there are "dozens of new congregations."

Friction within WCG congregations because of doctrinal changes has subsided. Fezell remarks that "more than 99 percent of current members...embrace the church's changes," having prayerfully worked through biblical issues. He notes that Plain Truth Ministries, which broadcasts *Plain Truth Commentary* and offers *Plain Truth* magazine, is a WCG spin-off that operates interdenominationally, and that the church's official magazine, *Christian Odyssey* began in January of 2005. Fezell says that the WCG plans to offer online "streaming media discussions and classes" on the Bible, theology, and Christian living. The WCG introduced Ambassador School of Christian Ministry in 2003, which offers denominationally recognized degrees.

It currently operates completely online, according to Fezell, but will offer weekend classes soon. The WCG updates members through a weekly e-mail newsletter, *WCG Today*. The WCG Web site provides a wealth of information about its history and teachings; links to associated ministries offer information geared toward racial reconciliation and addressing the needs of women and youth.

Leaving Babylon? Unhappy with the dramatic changes, a number of splinter groups left the WCG to continue following Armstrong's teachings. Fezell notes that there are more than 100 such groups, which "cling to one form or another of Armstrongism," being "unable to let go of their belief that Herbert Armstrong was specially chosen by God to be God's 'end-time' messenger."

The United Church of God, headquartered in Cincinnati, Ohio, officially formed in 1995. It has around 20,000 members in more than 40 countries, and is governed by its president, Clyde Kilough, and a council of 12 elders. The group's online history describes the WCG's changes as an "unwarranted shift" that resulted in the exodus of more than 100 WCG ministers and many others from the WCG. Like Armstrongism, it defines the Holy Spirit as "the power of God and the Spirit of life eternal" and affirms belief in observing "a seventh-day Sabbath," "a modern application of the ancient Hebrew Holy Day seasons," and Old Testament dietary laws.

The Philadelphia Church of God, which is located in Edmund, Oklahoma, and has less than 10,000 members, was founded in 1989 by Gerald Flurry after the WCG excommunicated him. Its online biography states that Christ's church was "rendered virtually ineffective for 1,900 years," but "was revived by Jesus Christ...in the 20th century" through Armstrong, the "ONE MAN to revive and lead the Church of God in the Philadelphia era" (emphasis in original). The group states that Armstrong "was God's 20th-century apostle" and its doctrinal statement affirms belief in obedience to Old Testament holy days. The church also offers Armstrong's literature on healing, "pagan" holidays, and the role of Britain and the United States in prophecy.

The 7,000-member Living Church of God, headquartered in Charlotte, North Carolina, previously said on its Web site that Armstrong ordained its leader, Roderick C. Meredith. The group has emphasized that obedience is necessary for salvation. Its March 2004 doctrinal statement defines "living faith" as "doing what God says" and teaches that obeying God's law "through Christ living in us...makes one a true saint." According to the statement, this law includes observing Old Testament holy days and a Saturday Sabbath.

Other smaller groups affirm their grounding in the Armstrong tradition. The 4,000-member Intercontinental Church of God, headquartered in Tyler, Texas, was started by Herbert Armstrong's late son, Garner Ted Armstrong. Its statement of beliefs claims that salvation is a process that includes grace and "living a life of faith and obedience" that will culminate in "birth into God's Kingdom as a spirit being."

The 500-member Church of the Great God, headquartered in Fort Mill, South Carolina, began in 1992. According to the group's account, its head pastor, John Rittenbaugh, resigned from the WCG out of concern that the WCG had abandoned teachings associated with, among other things, "the establishment of the Kingdom of God...and the possible prophetic significance of news events." The group believes that Armstrong was God's apostle who was "used to reveal His way in our time."

The Restored Church of God, located in Wadsworth, Ohio, is associated with David C. Pack, who was fired from another splinter group. In its online self-description, it claims to be "the *only* true extension of The Worldwide Church of God" (emphasis in original) as it was before Armstrong's death. Its communications director, Jeffrey Ambrose, declined to provide the Journal with an estimate of its membership.

A Different Controversy. The WCG splinter groups offer educational programs, magazines, and other resources that reveal (whether explicitly or not) how strong they feel about their identity with the original WCG. The WCG continues to be controversial, no longer because it denies historic Christian doctrines, but now because it affirms them.

— John A. Peters