



Transforming the Truth

The Worldwide Church of God Continues to “Make” History

by Peter Ditzel

The suggestion a decade ago that the Worldwide Church of God (WCG) would be receiving accolades from such well-known Christian figures as D. James Kennedy, Hank Hanegraaff, Jack Hayford, Steve Brown, and Paul Cedar, or that the leader of the WCG, Joseph Tkach, would be a guest on *The Bible Answer Man*, *The 700 Club*, and other Christian programs, would have been met with disbelief. Not only has this happened, but a major Christian book publisher (Multnomah) has published Tkach's book, *Transformed by Truth*. The book claims to give the “inside story” of how the WCG rejected “the teachings of founder Herbert W. Armstrong,” but perhaps the cover's semi-transparent portrait of Armstrong looming out of his gravestone and out of the clouds hints at an additional inside story.

POSITIVE CHANGES

The church that was to become the WCG sprang out of meetings that started in Eugene, Ore., on the night of July 9, 1933.¹ But the WCG was far from an orthodox, Christian church. It taught a unique blend of peculiar teachings and cultic practices that came to be known as Armstrongism.

Armstrong died in January 1986. His successor, Joseph Tkach Sr., oversaw major changes in the church's doctrines that officially did away with much of the Armstrongism in the WCG. With his death in September

1995, Tkach Sr. was succeeded by his son, Joseph Tkach.

The article “New Wine in Old Wineskins” (*The Quarterly Journal* July-September 1995), told about the changes up to the time shortly before Tkach Sr.'s death and listed many of the striking and positive changes the WCG had made, but also pointed out several areas of concern. It is heartening to see how many have been satisfied in recent WCG writings, including *Transformed by Truth*: the WCG's emphasis on the Gospel, on salvation in Jesus Christ alone, indicates that legalism is no longer official WCG teaching; the WCG has made frank retractions of past WCG teachings in public arenas; the WCG has admitted that Herbert W. Armstrong was wrong to claim the WCG was the true church; the WCG now teaches original sin; it teaches that Jesus was eternally God's Son; it has admitted that orthodox Christianity has been right all along; and it has adopted the Statement of Faith of the National Association of Evangelicals (more about the WCG's own Statement of Beliefs later).

Another concern expressed in 1995 was that the WCG had not admitted that past teachings were heresy. Where the WCG was at that time merely saying that a past teaching was “not accurate,” it has now started

using words such as “unorthodox,” “heterodoxical,” “not orthodox,” and “different gospel.” In a Feb. 23, 1998, letter, Joseph Tkach says that he doesn't “consider it a compromise to be more generous in using terms such as ‘unorthodox,’ or ‘heterodoxical’ than using the term ‘heresy.’” This statement was made in the context of a paragraph about Tkach's desire to not repel people who have internalized heresy.

CONTINUING PROGRESS

In many respects, *Transformed by Truth* continues the positive and encouraging course the WCG has been taking for the past few years. It contains numerous references to the Gospel, salvation through faith in Jesus, and the wrongs of peculiar Armstrongite doctrines that diverted people from the Gospel and Jesus.

Also constructive are Tkach's pilgrimage account and his admissions of past WCG errors. For example:

“[After quoting John 5:39-40] For so many long years, this is exactly the error we made! We searched the Scriptures diligently to discover the right twist to this doctrine or the correct slant to that one. We got lost in minutiae and largely missed the real treasure, Jesus Christ Himself. ... We searched the Scriptures because in them we thought we had

eternal life; yet we did not come fully to Jesus that we might truly live.”²

Scattered throughout the book are revelations of the WCG’s former warped views on the Bible, the world, and even Jesus Himself:

“But Jesus? We didn’t spend too much time on Him. ... That was all the namby-pamby, sloppy stuff anyway. ... In an odd way, we had an almost negative predisposition toward Jesus. It was nothing we had planned, nothing official. But since we had distanced ourselves from Protestants and since they spoke so much of Jesus, we didn’t. Who wanted to sound like a Protestant? Who wanted to talk like a member of one of the harlot daughters of Babylon?”³

Transformed by Truth also admits to the errors of past legalism and even contains an admirable view toward the keeping of days.⁴

DISAPPOINTMENTS

Yet, despite these pluses, *Transformed by Truth* contained questionable areas that would need clarification before a final opinion of the book could be formed. So, still with hopes of being able to write a positive review, this writer sent a letter to Joseph Tkach, admitting that its questions were pointed, but not because of any “angry, bitter, caustic, sarcastic, or hostile spirit” (which the WCG had accused critics of in the past) but “for the sake of avoiding misunderstanding, bringing out your clearest answers, and thereby, hopefully, fostering accord.”

It was disappointing to read the accusative tone and lack of clarity in Tkach’s reply. Questions concerning *Transformed by Truth* were not satisfactorily answered. Space limitations prevent a complete inventory of concerns but the most significant ones will be addressed.

EQUIVOCATION OVER MAN AS GOD

On page 93, Tkach makes a welcome admission that the WCG used to teach that the destiny of believers was to become God even as God is

God. Unfortunately, he muddies this on page 153. He quotes Herbert Armstrong explaining his heresy of man becoming God: “We shall be as much God as God Himself is God, a God Family. God the Father will always be at the head of that whole Family. Jesus Christ will always be next in that Family. The rest of us at the resurrection, at the time of the Second Coming of Christ, will be the Bride marrying Him.” (By the way, Armstrong’s statement contains another heresy. By putting Jesus lower than the Father, he becomes guilty of subordinationism. Tkach never addresses this in *Transformed by Truth*.) Tkach then says, “this paragraph shows that we also insisted we would never be completely identical to God. God was forever going to be a couple of steps ahead of us.... Therefore He would ‘always be at the head of that whole Family.’”

But there is a problem here. Armstrong says in this statement, “We shall be as much God as God Himself is God.” This clearly means being identical with God. What he goes on to say, or Tkach’s interpretation of what he goes on to say since Armstrong doesn’t explicitly state it, is that man will not be identical with the Father. What has occurred here is equivocation. Tkach has changed the definition of God from meaning a member of the God Family to meaning God the Father.

Upon having this called to his attention, Tkach replied:

“Since we have embraced the Trinity, in order to connect with those who have doubts about the triune nature of God, it is vital that we accurately represent what the majority of people believed Herbert Armstrong to be saying about the destiny of becoming God as God is God. We clearly point out that HWA’s [Armstrong’s] teaching was polytheistic and false. People would not be reached if we were to fail to point out that HWA never believed anyone would be congruent or identical to God. In fact, by making such a mistake of misrepresenting what HWA believed, we would discredit ourselves with the very audience

that we would like to reach.”

“Certainly, we are aware that HWA’s oft used phrase — ‘to be God as God is God’ — would automatically convey to most readers the concept of equality and congruency with God. In other words, we also must deal with what the majority believed rather than just the clear cut statements that are easily seen as heretical.”⁵

Tkach seems to want to convey the idea that the majority of people understood that Armstrong “never believed anyone would be congruent or identical to God,” but he also says that Armstrong’s “to be God as God is God” statement “would automatically convey to most readers the concept of equality and congruency with God.” This is hardly a clear reply, and at best it sidesteps the concern expressed to Tkach that he has inserted a definition for God into Armstrong’s statement that Armstrong never intended.

One is left to believe that what the WCG has given with one hand by admitting “we taught that the destiny of all true believers (that is, members in good standing of the WCG) was to become God even as God is God ... to become God even as He is God,”⁶ it has tried to take away with the other hand through ambiguity.

In case anyone is really in doubt over what Armstrong taught on this subject, notice these very unambiguous passages from pages 21-22 of his booklet, *Why Were You Born?*:

“The PURPOSE of life is that in us God is really re-creating His own kind — reproducing Himself after His own kind — for we are, upon real conversion, actually begotten as sons, yet unborn, of God...we shall be instantaneously CHANGED from mortal to immortal — we shall then be BORN of God — WE SHALL THEN BE GOD! ... Do you really grasp it? The PURPOSE of your being alive is that finally you will 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.”

Could Armstrong have made himself any plainer? He believed and taught that we will be God as Jesus and the Father are God. No amount of dust thrown up by Tkach can ever obscure such clarity.

DISSONANT VIEWS OF ARMSTRONG

Cognitive dissonance is “psychological conflict resulting from incongruous beliefs and attitudes held simultaneously.”⁷ Tkach uses the term to refer to the fact that under Herbert Armstrong, WCG members often held inconsistent and contradictory beliefs at the same time. This is certainly true. Unfortunately, Tkach himself seems to continue to hold inconsistent and contradictory beliefs concerning Armstrong.

In 1995, this writer expressed concern that the WCG was still calling Herbert Armstrong “a minister of Jesus Christ.” *Transformed by Truth* doesn’t contain that phrase, but Tkach nonetheless paints an unnecessarily ambiguous picture of Armstrong and admits his personal ambivalence toward him. This remains a big concern.

Notice what Tkach, the first pastor general of the WCG to have been raised from childhood in Armstrongism, writes:

“As I write these words, I’m working in the office once occupied by Herbert W. Armstrong. I’m sitting at the desk Mr. Armstrong used, and I’m looking out the windows that once served as his eye on the world below. Everywhere I turn my head there are reminders of his strong leadership and pervasive influence. As I gaze on his portrait and glimpse mementos from his world travels that are scattered throughout our Pasadena headquarters, I feel compelled to try to make sense of what has happened in the Worldwide Church of God since his death in January 1986. So I sit in Mr. Armstrong’s former office, trying to look back and understand the man who led our church for so many years.”⁸

It’s possible that Tkach is having difficulty gaining a true perspective of Armstrong in such an environment. What he says about Armstrong bears this out. For example, “It is necessary to be honest about the errors that he [Armstrong] taught, yet it is appropriate to show respect to him as the founder of a movement that taught Jesus as being the only name under heaven by which we can be saved.”⁹

Notice how this clashes with what Tkach writes in other parts of the book (and how even these statements are self-contradictory):

“[Armstrong] taught that people were not saved by law-keeping but by the grace of God through faith in the death and resurrection of Christ, yet he also taught that God would finally save only those who obeyed Him, including obedience to WCG teachings such as observance of the Saturday Sabbath and the annual holy days. His teaching minimized the sufficiency of the saving work of Christ and emphasized the coming millennial kingdom. He often characterized Christ as little more than a divine messenger.”¹⁰

And,

“We also claimed that while Christ died for the sins of the world, believing in Christ was insufficient to gain salvation; the believer must also obey Christ.”¹¹

In response to queries concerning his dissonant views toward Armstrong, Tkach wrote, “To the degree that Mr. Armstrong taught the gospel of salvation, to that degree he was a ‘minister’ of Christ.”¹² But to what degree did Armstrong teach the Gospel of salvation? In fact, Armstrong ridiculed the Gospel of salvation, calling it a “false gospel” and saying, “Today’s customary gospel *about* Christ believes that simply ‘believing on Christ,’ which is professing Christ as personal Savior, means that one is already saved. Yet Mark 7:7-9 shows that many even go so far as to worship Christ, and all in vain because they do not obey God’s commandments — especially the Sabbath — but follow the traditions of men by which Satan has deceived the whole world.”¹³ Besides misusing Scriptures

such as Mark 7:7-9 to support his distorted view of the Gospel, Armstrong even lampooned the Christian belief in being saved upon believing the Gospel: “It is as if some mystic switch has been flipped and the person will be shot instantly up to heaven upon death, which so many believe is not really a death after all.”¹⁴

Armstrong taught that *past* sins were blotted out by Christ’s blood but that salvation was then dependent on the WCG member’s obedience. That is not the evangelical understanding of Jesus being the only name under heaven by which we can be saved. It would have been more accurate for Tkach to have said that Armstrong was the founder of a movement that taught salvation by works.

But Tkach does not agree:

“As far as Mr. Armstrong’s teachings about salvation, we cannot deny that he taught salvation was a gift of God through Christ. He quoted and expounded Ephesians 2:8-9 on this point over and over. Mr. Armstrong’s error was that he also taught Christians must keep such old covenant regulations such as the Sabbath and the food laws. Certainly, you have no quarrel with us in saying that he presented a ‘salvation by works’ message.”

“But to say he ‘taught salvation by works’ alone is misleading, especially for people who have left our fellowship and have not grasped the pure gospel. It becomes a fruitless point of debate with them as they quickly point out that Herbert Armstrong taught that salvation came as a gift from God through Christ alone. Unfortunately, he also taught that to be numbered among the people of God one had to keep certain old covenant laws and believe such exotic doctrines as the United States and Britain in prophecy. I believe that I make this clear in my book.”¹⁵

Unfortunately, what becomes clear is that, at least when discussing the subject of Herbert Armstrong, Tkach

misses the fact that adding any works for salvation to salvation by Christ alone makes Christ's sacrifice of no effect and is therefore an attempt at salvation solely by works. "Christ is become of no effect unto you, whosoever of you are justified by the law; ye are fallen from grace" (Galatians 5:4). For those without cognitive dissonance, there can be no believing in both salvation by Christ alone and in salvation by works. The two are mutually incompatible.

But what exactly is Tkach trying to say about Armstrong, and for what reason? He continues in his letter,

"Tragically, [Armstrong] used the term 'qualify for salvation' to teach the Christian responsibility of practicing the spiritual disciplines of prayer, meditation, Bible study, etc. In using such terms, there is no doubt in my mind that he promoted a salvation by works concept. I have found for many people it is a more successful approach to present people with what he was trying to say, albeit very poorly said, than to dismiss him out of hand. Once people hear the truth correctly presented, the Holy Spirit convicts them without our resorting to pejoratives and unnecessary condemnations."¹⁶

Tkach says he has no doubt Armstrong promoted a salvation by works concept, but it is a more successful approach (presumably in evangelizing present and former WCG members, especially those who are not attending any church)¹⁷ to present people with what Armstrong was trying to say, albeit very poorly. Tkach apparently is trying to justify the contradictory positions he holds concerning Armstrong and what he taught by saying that while Armstrong taught salvation by works, he didn't really mean to teach salvation by works. What Tkach doesn't explain is how he can know that Armstrong did not mean what he said and wrote. As has been said of the WCG's founder before, Herbert Armstrong was rarely right, but he was never ambiguous.

If we are to avoid repeating the tragic mistakes of the past, Armstrong

must be accurately remembered for the heresies he taught and the cult he established. Calling Armstrong "a minister of Jesus Christ" or making statements such as, "[The WCG] respects [Herbert Armstrong] as the man God used to bring many to a saving knowledge of Christ," that appeared in the May/June 1996 WCG publication, *Reviews You Can Use*, is a travesty of history. And a WCG Fact Sheet that calls the cult he founded "a Christian ministry established in Eugene, Oregon, in 1933" is simply propagandist disinformation. Tragically, when people who consider themselves qualified to teach cast such a positive light on Armstrong, Armstrongites can be left feeling completely justified in continuing to follow their late mentor.

On page 189 of his book, Tkach writes,

"First, I firmly believe that as a church we were essentially wrong on many crucial issues — and yet I also know that it was Mr. Armstrong who put the system in place that eventually got us where we are today. While much of what Mr. Armstrong taught was in serious error, he also gave us some things — a profound respect for the Bible, for example — that helped to pave the way to our current biblical understandings."

This writer doesn't expect Tkach to say that Herbert Armstrong is definitely consigned to hell fire for eternity and doesn't believe that Tkach or any other mortal is in a position to say that with certainty. But to give Armstrong credit for the WCG arriving at correct doctrine is absurd.

Imagine a passenger ship bound from New York to England. After leaving port, the captain, who has no idea how to read navigational charts, steers the ship south and rounds the tip of South America. Continually studying the ship's charts and telling his officers — who are also ignorant how to read charts — how important the charts are, while allowing no one to advise him how to understand them, he weaves the ship between the

islands of the Pacific, scraping bottom several times. A number of the passengers die during the journey, never having arrived at their destination. In the South China Sea, the captain drops dead at the helm, and the first officer takes command. He and the other officers, getting advice and how-to-read-charts books from passing ships, figure out how to navigate their way to England. But when asked for an opinion of his late captain, the officer, instead of admitting that the man was a failure in all ways by which a captain should be judged, says that while the captain "made some mistakes, as all captains do, he was really a good ship's captain because he started the journey by which we reached our destination and taught us a great respect for charts."

Tkach continues,

"Second, I could point out that many men God has used did a lot of foolish things or made many inaccurate or even harmful statements. All of us show our brokenness in one way or another. John Wesley was not known for having an ideal marriage. Martin Luther was stridently anti-Semitic. John Calvin allowed a theological opponent to be burned at the stake. It's not my place (or yours) to question their standing in Christ. The same could be said of Mr. Armstrong."¹⁸

True, we all sin and make mistakes, Luther and Calvin included. But a minister of Jesus Christ does not fight *against* the Gospel by calling it a "false gospel" and a "counterfeit gospel," as Herbert W. Armstrong regularly did. A minister of Jesus Christ does not call the Body of Jesus Christ, which is the Christian church, "Satan's counterfeit church," "counterfeit Christianity," the "false church," "the harlot's daughters," and so forth, as Armstrong often did. A minister of Jesus Christ does not preach heresies as foundational truth, as Armstrong clearly did. And a basic qualification of a minister of Jesus Christ is that he hold "fast the faithful word" and use

“sound doctrine” (Titus 1:9), or as Paul exhorts Timothy, he should be able to rightly divide the word of truth (2 Timothy 2:15); this is something Herbert Armstrong did not do.

To teach doctrine — particularly doctrine concerning such essential matters as justification, regeneration, sanctification, the Trinity, the Gospel, the nature of God, etc. — that disagrees with biblical, orthodox teaching is, by definition, heresy. Armstrong taught many heresies. He knew that what he taught was contrary to orthodoxy, and was proud of it. Herbert W. Armstrong was, by definition, a heretic. Yet *Transformed by Truth*, though in places admitting Armstrong’s errors, nevertheless creates an image of him that is not accurate and is not consistent with the evangelical statements made elsewhere in the book. Tkach is simply inconsistent and ambiguous on the subject of Herbert W. Armstrong. Anything that portrays Armstrong and his doctrines as less harmful than they were is dangerously misleading.

Tkach seems to want to imply that the changes made since Armstrong’s death would have been made with the WCG founder’s approval, done in the spirit of Armstrong’s “respect for the authority of Scripture.” However, WCG history of the 1970s proves this is nonsense.

This writer’s letter to Tkach stated, “In the 1970s when some in the WCG ministry tried to introduce some of the very changes that were made after his death, Armstrong denounced them as liberals trying to water down or destroy ‘God’s truth’ (i.e., Armstrong’s heresies).” Avoiding the obvious implication that Armstrong does not fit the “minister of Jesus Christ” mold he has been trying to stuff him into, Tkach put a spin on this writer’s statement to make it seem to be a reference to the WCG’s Systematic Theology Project (STP) of the 1970s. Tkach said that the STP made only minor changes, and then he insinuated that this writer’s position was based on “fabrication” and “hearsay.”¹⁹

But even the “minor” changes made

by the STP were soundly condemned by Armstrong. And the STP was never mentioned. The comment was based on numerous letters written by WCG ministers in the 1970s seen by this writer while working as a WCG employee. These letters concerned many of the same subjects the WCG dealt with after Armstrong’s death. Interestingly, former WCG pastor David Covington recently independently corroborated the existence of these letters in his *Crossroads Online* (Issue #5, Fall 1997, page 6).

SPIRITUAL ABUSE AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Another area of concern expressed in the 1995 article about the WCG was that the WCG had dodged accountability and had not admitted to cultism and the damage it had caused (see also “The Two Faces of the Worldwide Church of God,” *The Quarterly Journal*, January-March 1997, for a fuller treatment of this subject). Although there have since been some apologies and admissions to cultism and damage, *Transformed by Truth* does little to address the interpersonal dynamic in the WCG that drove the cultism and spiritual abuse and says nothing about whether abuse continues. When asked what the WCG is doing about spiritual abuse, Tkach replied,

“As far as the ‘spiritual abuse’ question is concerned, the [WCG] continually addresses itself to this through various actions. This includes instructing our ministry to be shepherds and not sheriffs. We also have small groups in virtually every congregation in which healing can and does occur. Members give testimonials of how they have been spiritually healed within the [WCG]. Many of us attend seminars on spiritual healing and seek to implement proposals that will help the process. We have consulted with, and continue to do so, a respected and experienced interdenominational group of pastors, denominational leaders, authors, seminary professors, and others. ...”

“Above all, our church has a spirit of openness and love that it did not have in the past. We are all quite aware of the pain that members of the [WCG] suffered through the years. I have first-hand knowledge and experiences of such poor treatment. We point all who need healing to our Lord and Savior. We are always willing to talk and help where we can.”²⁰

Yet PFO continues to receive reports from recently exited WCG members saying that there is still abuse. For example, on March 1, 1998, PFO received this message in response to “The Two Faces of the Worldwide Church of God” from a man who was at that time still a member of the WCG:

“Bravo! As a soon to exit member of the [WCG], I can vouch for everything you wrote in your article. Although the abusive cultic practices now in use are not nearly as oppressive as they were when I joined the WCG in 1980, they still exist and are used.”

“There is still a caste system in the WCG. ... The WCG ministers I know are still sensitive to criticisms of Herbert W. Armstrong. ... Guilt-tripping [trying to get members to give more to the WCG by equating loyalty to God with giving to the WCG] is still used in the highest echelons of the church. ...”

“Finally, many of the WCG’s pastors do not have an understanding of the basics of Christian theology. They are handicapped by their Ambassador College education, where they studied Armstrongism, not theology. They really have no business in the pulpit because they are not qualified to be ministers in a real Christian church. They are skilled in cultic mind control (reading Steven Hassan’s *Understanding Cult Mind Control* was like reading about the WCG), but know nothing about the Bible.”

“My own pastor told me that the WCG was never a cult, and the

ministry never practiced mind control. I was speechless when he said this. Many other ministers believe this as well. How can they help the membership to heal from their cultic experience when they don't think we need healing? ..."

"Your article hit the nail on the head. As an insider, I can vouch for everything you said. I urge you to continue exposing the WCG's sham reform."²¹

On page 188 of his book, Tkach mentions that "every employee of the church has a salary which is less than \$100,000 per year." Understanding that salary is not everything, this writer asked Tkach:

"1) Does anyone receive a total in salaries, monies, perks, benefits, anything else of financial value that is more than \$100,000? 2) Assuming \$100,000 is named because some people are receiving that in salaries or close to it, why is anyone making anywhere near that much at a time when the WCG is claiming great financial loss, you have had to make big cutbacks, and you are telling members that not being obligated to tithe means they should show where their hearts are by giving more than ten percent? How can someone making close to \$100,000 a year ask in good conscience someone making \$20,000 a year to sacrifice more?"

Tkach answered the first question by writing, "We do not have employees making \$100,000 or more.... There are no perks for employees except for the parsonages that are occupied until the sale of the Pasadena property. I believe we are being good stewards of the resources God has provided to our fellowship, as do our auditors since we received an unqualified opinion from Coopers and Lybrand. We are always looking for ways to improve as well."²²

But even when Armstrong was pastor general and Stanley Rader was treasurer, and amid numerous allegations of wildly high salaries and

church funds being spent on high living during trips abroad — to "spread the Gospel of the Kingdom" — and for expensive gifts to foreign leaders, the WCG was receiving high grades from its auditors (whose job it is to see that the accounts are in order, not to judge whether someone's salary is too high or if it is wrong to make donors feel guilty for not giving more).²³ Readers should note that Tkach did not address the second question.

Another concern raised in past articles was that the WCG had not abandoned its hierarchical government. It has still not done so, but on pages 98, 186, and 199 of *Transformed by Truth*, Tkach makes promises of modifying it. This writer was somewhat discouraged — in light of his statement on page 199 that he expects "the changes to be effective by the end of 1997 or early 1998" — to learn in the Dec. 23, 1997, *Worldwide News* that on Nov. 20, 1997, the WCG Board of Directors only then "began to discuss potential changes in the way the Church and its Board functions." When asked how soon we can expect the changes to become effective, Tkach replied:

"You were troubled about what you apparently feel are contradictory statements I have made about certain changes in church governance. In my book I said these changes would be made by early 1998. But upon reading the November 20, 1997, *Worldwide News* you 'discovered' that the discussion about these changes was just beginning. The fact is discussions have been under way for some time about these issues. As the article pointed out, a formal process has begun. I can't give you an exact time when the changes will be implemented because our estimates are not always accurate. Many unforeseen circumstances and complications can arise. My expectations that I mentioned in the book obviously were a bit too optimistic."²⁴

This article mentions that Tkach's book expresses an admirable view toward the keeping of days. Yet it

would be remiss not to point out that actual WCG practice may be different. WCG members who don't keep the Sabbath or festivals are perceived by other members as less spiritual.

This writer also has an invitation dated Sept. 15, 1997, sent to some ex-WCG members from a WCG minister who was to be the coordinator of the WCG Feast of Tabernacles site in Melbourne, Fla., in 1997.

When asked about celebration of the festivals, Tkach said, "Regarding the biblical festivals, the answer is that these are old covenant institutions and the [WCG] does not observe them. We explain that there is only one way they can be 'kept' or 'observed,' and that is in an old covenant sense. To observe these Festivals required that the participants not work on what the old covenant describes as holy days, that commanded assemblies be attended, and that people go up to Jerusalem. We do not command our members to do any of these things."²⁵

But the criteria Tkach lists includes going up to Jerusalem, a practice the WCG never considered necessary (feasts were celebrated at sites throughout the world). This means the WCG never "observed" these days in the past, and doesn't "observe" them now, but it celebrates them now as it did in the past. So where's the change?

Of course, through most of its history, it *thought* it was observing them. Today, it still provides for celebrating them by, for example, providing services at Feast of Tabernacles sites on the days the Old Testament prescribes according to the Hebrew calendar. When one considers the longtime legalistic attachment WCG members had for these days, one must question the wisdom of the WCG continuing to support the celebration of these days, albeit with the understanding that they are not required and are not really being "observed" according to the Old Covenant.

Of further concern is the fact that the theme for the 1997 Feast of Tabernacles was announced as "Cel-

ebrating the Kingdom of God." In fact, Herbert W. Armstrong traditionally billed the Feast of Tabernacles as a celebration of the "soon coming Kingdom of God" and used it to promote his gospel of the kingdom, which he preached instead of the Christian Gospel of salvation in Jesus Christ alone. Whether or not the messages at the 1997 feast directly promoted Armstrong's gospel, the choice of themes was at best unfortunate.

CUSTOMIZED ORTHODOXY

Previous *Quarterly Journal* articles about the WCG pointed out its dangerous belief that this is not the only day of salvation, that there is a chance for salvation after death. *Transformed by Truth* doesn't retract this teaching and even seems to support it in the appendix, "18 Truths Restored by Herbert W. Armstrong."

When asked whether he still believes and teaches this, Tkach answered first by telling of the WCG's tolerance on this subject and then proceeded to confuse the issue:

"We have no single dogmatic teaching about the fate of the 'unevangelized dead,' and no specific belief about this issue is a test of fellowship. Typically, we point out the five views regarding the destiny of the unevangelized dead and explain that the first two are orthodox and the last three are generally considered unorthodox."²⁶

Space doesn't permit an explanation of the five views Tkach presented, but among the last three is the belief that the unevangelized will receive an opportunity to believe in Jesus after death. Remember that Tkach said the last three views "are generally considered unorthodox." But despite this, Tkach then goes on to challenge this writer's statement to him that this view is "certainly not orthodox" by asking by what criteria this writer defines orthodoxy, and he concludes the discussion on this subject by saying that "according to the standard definition of orthodoxy, the [WCG] accepts all orthodox Christian be-

liefs."²⁷ What is one to make of such an answer?

Another serious problem in *Transformed by Truth* is found in the "Worldwide Church of God Statement of Beliefs" toward the back of the book. The problem first was pointed out in an article by Robert L. Sumner in *The Biblical Evangelist* (Nov.-Dec. 1997). On page 8, the author cites Dr. Ralph G. Colas, executive secretary of the American Council of Christian Churches, as pointing out that this WCG doctrinal statement "describes the Bible as 'the fully reliable record of God's revelation to humanity' (emphasis added)."

In full, this WCG statement concerning the Bible says "that the Holy Scriptures, comprised of the Old and New Testaments, are the foundation of truth and the accurate and infallible record of God's revelation to humanity." Notice that this statement says nothing about the Bible being a revelation from God or divinely inspired; it says nothing about the Bible being the inerrant Word of God; instead of calling the Bible in its entirety the sole authority for all Christian belief and practice, it vaguely labels it "the foundation of truth," and the "record of God's revelation" instead of the revelation itself. As Dr. Sumner states, "Calling the Bible a record instead of a revelation is the language of neo-orthodoxy — Karl Barth, Emil Brunner, Reinhold Niebuhr, et al — not orthodoxy!"

UNANSWERED QUESTIONS

Besides giving unclear answers to some questions, Tkach didn't answer about a dozen more. For example, what many observers were seeing from their perspective during the period of change in the WCG is supported by some of the statements Tkach himself makes in his book; but when asked whether he agreed that these observers were justified in taking the positions they did, Tkach didn't answer.

Also unanswered were the following, concerning the announced changes in church governance: If the pastor general's term will be limited to a specified number of years, how

will he be chosen? How much say will the average member have in this? How much will this governance change affect the rest of the hierarchy from the congregational level to headquarters? How accountable will church leaders be to the membership? Tkach also gave no response to an inquiry regarding the availability of photocopies of old Herbert Armstrong documents quoted in notes at the end of *Transformed by Truth* that imply Armstrong started out with a more nearly orthodox grasp of the Sabbath question and the Mosaic law than he later taught.

Although Tkach's letter is eleven pages, much of it is taken up in castigating PFO, this author, "cult watchers" in general, and even offering criticism to the Body of Christ. He offers this explanation for overlooked questions: "If I have neglected to offer a reply to any questions in your letter, it is only because I overlooked it with one exception. I chose not to address comments regarding David Covington because we cannot, given the record, accept him as a credible source."²⁸

This writer mentioned Covington only once in the letter only to note a historical event, and Tkach answered the question that followed. It seems that the WCG will take every opportunity to try to discredit Covington, something it has unsuccessfully tried to do in correspondence with PFO for months.

CLOSING THE DOORS TO CRITICISM

Let's clarify that criticisms of Tkach are not intended to be a judging of his Christianity or a critique of his walk with the Lord. The purpose of this article is to update readers on progress in the WCG's move toward evangelical orthodoxy since previous articles and as revealed in *Transformed by Truth*. Positive steps are reported as encouraging news in which we can all rejoice. Negative news is reported, not as a judgment on anyone's personal Christian development, but because of the danger spreading aberrant beliefs concerning doctrine, WCG history, or Herbert W. Armstrong can pose to others.

Joseph Tkach's and his colleagues' historically challenged view of WCG history colors the WCG as having been a Christian church all along (albeit while teaching many errors) and its founder as a minister of Jesus Christ who promoted the Gospel (along with a lot of nonsense) and who led many people to salvation in Jesus Christ alone. And these people seem to believe that promoting this newspeak history will actually help their members and former members.

Even so, signs of this policy's failure may already be showing. Tkach admits in the April 1998 *Worldwide News* that while 30 percent of members are donating either the same or more than last year, "70 percent are giving either far less or nothing at all." It seems that WCG members are voting with their pocketbooks, and a 70 percent vote of no confidence is a sign of serious mistrust between members and church leaders.

The WCG would do well to promote the unadulterated truth and let God do the rest. It is the truth, not a myth, that sets us free.²⁹ And it is the Holy Spirit who enables us to believe that truth through the transformation that He works in our individual, not collective, minds.

Has the WCG been "transformed by truth?" Some individuals have been regenerated and this has had a great effect on official church doctrine. But it is wrong to say that the entire organization has been so transformed. Certainly we should rejoice in the progress the WCG has made and in the lives that have been changed by the working of the Holy Spirit. But this does not mean we must jump on the bandwagon of those giving blanket approval to the WCG while it continues to promote a distorted view of its history and founder and while we continue to receive distressing reports from those who are or who have recently been members of the WCG.

Regeneration does not instantly make anyone perfect. We carry over many errors in our way of thinking that sanctification may help to correct, though never completely rid us of in

our lifetimes. There is nothing heinous in Christians holding the leaders of the WCG up to the standards of 1 Timothy 3, Titus 1, and related Scriptures, while accepting individuals as Christians based on their confession of Jesus Christ alone as Savior.

It would simply be unfair to those seeking a church to attend or Christian literature to read, to give a clean bill of health to a church with the history of the WCG that continues, despite whatever progress it has made, to display the problems touched upon in this article while denying that it has them. In his letter to me, Tkach points out that many Christian churches have had problems. This is true, but in most cases these churches are open to criticism and correction, and those problems are worked out. (An excellent example concerns the Evangelical Free Church of America, and is reported in *The Quarterly Journal*, July-September 1996.)

When a church closes itself to criticism and correction, and perhaps even tries to intimidate the critics, then that church must be exposed and warned against. *The Quarterly Journal* is simply applying this procedure to the WCG which, although it has made many changes, appears to have reached a sticking point on the issues discussed in this article. We pray for repentance and reform, but until then we must reserve approval and continue to sound a warning.

Endnotes:

1. Herbert W. Armstrong, *Autobiography of Herbert W. Armstrong*. Pasadena, Calif.: Worldwide Church of God, 1986, Vol. 1, pp. 505-508.
2. Joseph Tkach, *Transformed by Truth*. Sisters, Ore.: Multnomah, 1997, pp. 31-32.
3. *Ibid.*, pg. 137.
4. See, for example, pp. 27-29.
5. Joseph Tkach, letter to Peter Ditzel, February 23, 1998, pp. 3-4.
6. *Transformed*, op. cit., pg. 93.
7. *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, 10th ed., s.v. "cognitive dissonance."
8. *Transformed*, op. cit., pg. 167.
9. *Ibid.*, pg. 168.
10. *Ibid.*, pg. 176.
11. *Ibid.*, pg. 95.
12. Tkach letter to Ditzel, op. cit., pg. 4.
13. Herbert W. Armstrong, *Mystery of the Ages*. Pasadena, Calif.: Worldwide Church

of God, 1985, soft-cover edition, pp. 228-229.

14. *Ibid.*, pg. 197.

15. Tkach letter to Ditzel, op. cit., pg. 4.

16. *Ibid.*

17. On pg. 6 of his letter to me, Tkach states, "We believe that individuals who have not aligned with splinter groups and simply stay at home after leaving our fellowship are much more fertile ground than [those on] a continued steady diet of Armstrongism."

18. *Transformed*, op. cit., pg. 189.

19. Tkach letter to Ditzel, op. cit., pg. 7.

20. *Ibid.*

21. E-mail message to PFO of March 1, 1998, on file.

22. Tkach letter to Ditzel, op. cit., pg. 8.

23. I asked Tkach whether "Rader still has some sort of church position, though not 'official,' and whether he is still receiving money from the WCG." He answered, "Regarding Stanley Rader, the answer is that he has no official position or any connection with the Worldwide Church of God."

24. Tkach letter to Ditzel, op. cit., pg. 8.

25. *Ibid.*, pg. 9.

26. *Ibid.*, pg. 8.

27. *Ibid.*

28. *Ibid.*, pg. 9.

29. In his rewrite of WCG history, Tkach seems to want to imply that the WCG has always been above lying. On page 20 of *Transformed*, Tkach describes a meeting he and WCG church administration director, Mike Feazell, had with cult watcher, Lorri MacGregor. When MacGregor asked them if they believed in justified lying, Feazell replied, "Certainly not. We were far too self-righteous for that!" But self-righteousness does not logically lead to honesty. The Pharisees were the epitome of self-righteousness, but Jesus called them liars (John 8:55), and it is obvious that they orchestrated lies to get Jesus condemned. When I worked with a team of WCG writers to answer letters, we would often answer a question by knowing the goal we had to reach (for example, support a statement Armstrong had made), and we would contort Scripture to reach that goal. Of course, we were caught up in the lie ourselves, but it was, nevertheless, a lie. I also attended a WCG session on public relations (it was part of the WCG's "Ministerial Refresher Program") in which the students (ministers and some headquarters employees) were told how to deal with difficult questions by turning them around with a spin and then ending the response with a positive statement (called a sparkler) about the church. I consider this to have been training in what MacGregor calls "justified lying," and David Covington reports that these sessions were still being given at least as late as 1992.

