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# Editorials

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## THE WORLDWIDE CHURCH OF GOD'S "ORTHODOX" BANDWAGON

In the decade following the death of Herbert W. Armstrong in 1986, the church he founded made an amazing transformation of doctrine into what it regards as a conversion from cult teaching to orthodox belief. Many, including prominent Christian apologetic and countercult ministries and respected Christian periodicals, have acclaimed this group's seceding from a state of heterodoxy into a mainline — and even evangelical — faith. Yet during the time others have been applauding the changeover, Personal Freedom Outreach remained cautious and restrained in hopping onto the bandwagon of those proclaiming the Worldwide Church of God to be orthodox.

Personal Freedom Outreach's lack of praise for this sect's transformation does not keep it from rejoicing and thanking God for the men and women set free from the bondage of false doctrine and spiritual abuse. PFO is enthusiastic and truly grateful for the members of this group who are now justified through grace alone, by faith alone, in Christ alone.

The sect's current leadership inherited the consequences of a half-century of Armstrong's false doctrine, false prophecy and spiritual abuse of his followers. And

while it is typical for the new leadership of a cult to make extensive changes in doctrine and practice when the founder dies, we acknowledge that it is unparalleled for the changes made to move a cult into a state of orthodoxy. These changes, therefore, are significant, necessary and welcomed.

Yet despite the changes, countless souls continue to be left without hope and others remain hurting, lost and wandering in the wilderness of confusion. The church's leaders attribute the division and frustration among members, along with the enormous financial deficits it is experiencing, to the repercussions of its transformation to orthodoxy. While this in one sense is true, it is also merely the consequence of false doctrine. False doctrine is indeed costly as lives are physically and spiritually crippled by its effects.

Early in the transformation, the Worldwide Church of God's "Public Affairs" department sought and sometimes succeeded in getting the endorsement of Christian media and evangelical ministries. Even with the efficacious dialogue which began to be realized, some like "Truths That Transform" (the nationally syndicated radio broadcast of Dr. James Kennedy) expressed optimism but remained guarded and cautious about the changes. Kennedy's ministry noted, "Those changes are welcome; however, we must be cautious in accepting their statements at face value. They have announced astounding

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## Endnotes:

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4. Michael Horton, *In the Face of God, The Dangers and Delights of Spiritual Intimacy*. Dallas: Word Publishing, 1996, pg. 46.
5. G. Richard Fisher and M. Kurt Goedelman, *The Confusing World of Benny Hinn*. Saint Louis: Personal Freedom Outreach, 1997, pp. 195-196.
6. *Christianity Today*, Feb. 9, 1998, pg. 46.
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11. "Bob Larson Resources 1998," ministry resource catalog.
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16. See further, *The Confusing World of Benny Hinn*, op. cit., pp. 1, 45, 52.
17. See further, Philip Schaff, *Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., Vol. 14, pg. 150.
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20. For more information on the "Pensacola Outpouring" and the Brownsville Revival, see *The Quarterly Journal*, April-June 1997 and January-March 1998.
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## EDITORIALS

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ing changes before, but church doctrine was not significantly altered. This church places public image at a premium."

The latter observation of the "Truths That Transform Action Sheet" was indeed insightful as in the early evangelical congresses in which the Pasadena-based church participated, members of its Public Affairs department, not its theologians, were the sect's representatives at these meetings.

Moreover, throughout the transformation — and even now in its wake — an issue that needs careful consideration is: Are the changes mere external representations or true internal persuasions?

Robert L. Sumner astutely noted that the Worldwide Church of God's "changes seem more *convenience* than *conviction*!" In his recent article "Is Armstrong's Cult Now Orthodox?" he writes:

"While going through their alleged metamorphose from a worm to a butterfly, the leaders repeatedly changed and modified their statements to please their 'guides.' For example, in the matter of the Trinity, especially as it related to the Holy Spirit, they would agree among themselves as to a position, then go to those whom they were trying to please, and say, 'How is this?' The latter would reply, 'It doesn't go far enough.' So they would go back to the drawing board and make suggested

changes, then return and ask, 'Now what do you think?' That kind of 'doctoring doctrine' is not the stuff of which true Bible believers are made" (*The Biblical Evangelist*, Nov.-Dec. 1997, pg. 7).

Early in the Worldwide Church of God's transformation process, PFO itself was asked by the sect's Pasadena headquarters to update literature to "reflect accurate information" as to the changes being made. Because the official theological positions of the Worldwide Church of God were in an unpredictable state of flux at that time, PFO was less than eager to make immediate changes.

In 1991, PFO responded to the request by saying, "If we update our article today, there is no guarantee that in a few months you would not be writing again asking for further revisions." A few years later, starting in 1995, PFO began to evaluate the Worldwide Church of God's move from cultism to orthodoxy in a series of articles. However, PFO's words to Worldwide Church of God leadership in its 1991 letter proved to be prophetic.

Late last year, the leadership of the church again wrote to PFO, this time asserting that PFO's revised "material is at best one-sided, containing half-truths, assumptions, and subjective judgments that are followed by a long list of somewhat dubious footnotes." The church's comments strongly propose that the PFO articles are greatly imprecise and in no way convey an accurate representation of its present conduct.

Yet at the very time PFO was receiving the Worldwide Church of God's censure, former members of the church were writing PFO and saying just the opposite — comments such as: "Thank you for addressing the issue

of accepting the WCG as 'mainstream' based on 'surface changes.' ... We are the forgotten abused. We are now accused of being 'unforgiving and angry' for leaving the 'Church'" and "Bravo! As a soon to exit member of the Worldwide Church of God, 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."

The defensive and pushy tone of the Worldwide Church of God's new round of communication showed little improvement from the arrogant and combative spirit the church had directed against both Christian ministries and individuals who, in recent years, did not express wholesale approval or still had concerns and criticism. For a church and people who claim to be transformed by a miracle of God, little, if any, of the fruit of the Spirit are readily evident — at least not in its letters to PFO.

Beyond the church's aggressiveness, other important matters encountered in the current dialogue caused even more reservations. The sect's "Director of Church Relations" charged that PFO must "feel" that it has "all of the information" it "need[s] to accurately report about what has happened in the Worldwide Church of God." In response to his charge and the allegations that our articles are "one sided" and contained "half-truths, assumptions, subjective judgments" and "somewhat dubious footnotes," PFO offered that it is not above correction in the articles it publishes.

Although such general and sweeping comments are troubling, PFO asked for clear examples of subjectivity and promised, where valid, to duly note and correct inaccuracies. This offer was extended in three separate letters. Yet the only response to each has been a blatant disregard of PFO's request combined with the implication that PFO is not concerned with the truth.

Another disturbing issue is the church's attempt to question the integrity of former Worldwide Church of God members who are openly critical of the sect. The church's letter to PFO challenged "the veracity of charges ... coming from a small group of former members and ministers." It further stated that this group's "allegations are far from the truth, and so go beyond simple misrepresentation."

PFO was told that: "Perhaps you are not aware, but we know that at least one reputable, independent third party source has asked one of your sources to be accountable for such misrepresentations." When PFO told the church of its aversion to such an indiscriminate "third party" unnamed accusation, it produced a copy of a letter from a minister in California addressed to former Worldwide Church of God staff member David W. Covington.

However, this letter and the subsequent inquiries it produced, in PFO's evaluation, did more to demonstrate

misrepresentation on the church's part than it did to disarm the trustworthiness of David Covington. The letter from this minister suggested that Covington could be charged with "defamation, slander and/or libel." This stemmed from a comment made by Covington and posted on his web site which, according to the minister, "claimed that Mr. Joe Tkach Jr. is the sole owner of the Pasadena [church headquarters] property."

Despite such a stern legal threat from this minister, his warning was not based upon firsthand knowledge or details as to what Covington actually said. He wrote to Covington that he "recently heard some disturbing news" and then issued his unwarranted comment that "If you are wrong, and you probably are, I think you could be charged with either defamation, slander and/or libel. I do not know for sure, since I'm neither an attorney, nor have I seen what you wrote." Such remarks are indeed ambiguous. In PFO's opinion, this certainly demonstrates a lack of wisdom on the minister's part. Before sending a letter issuing such accusations, it would be prudent to check out what was or wasn't said.

Moreover, Covington, upon receipt of the minister's letter, immediately deactivated his ministry's web site because his remarks had the potential of conveying misinformation. According to Covington, when he reactivated his web site "two weeks later it contained an apology and restatement regarding Joseph Tkach's relationship to the organization."

Yet Covington's responsive and corrective action was never mentioned or even alluded to by the Worldwide Church of God leadership in any of its letters to PFO. So it is apparent, despite all its appeals to PFO to be responsive with the "plain truth," they are above holding themselves to the same standard.

Two more unsettling specifics are closely interwoven and further give us pause: The church's continued kinship to its founder, Herbert W. Armstrong, and its conviction that its past doctrine and practice did not separate it from of the Body of Christ.

Concerning the former, much is being made by the church's hierarchy that critics will not be satisfied until the bones of Herbert W. Armstrong are exhumed and burned. This is a grave overstatement, to say the least. PFO is, however, deeply concerned by the continued claims and allusions to Armstrong "as a minister of Jesus Christ." It is inconceivable to us as to the amount of false doctrine, false prophecy and abusive practices of this man which has had to be altered and/or camouflaged, and for this organization to continue to promote him with such reverence. (For additional insight on the HWA/WCG relationship, see Peter Ditzel's article in this Journal, esp. pp. 7-9.)

And then there's the declaration that this church really has been "Christian" all along. A recently released "Fact Sheet" discloses "The Worldwide Church of God, a



*Christian ministry* [was] established in Eugene, Oregon, in 1933" (emphasis added). One current member of the sect, in a letter to PFO, offered a similar opinion when he wrote: "I think one of the greatest abuses of the former WCG was the denial of the breadth of the body of Christ — that there were indeed Christians outside the WCG."

Thus, in this member's view, what looms large is not the doctrinal transformation, but a move from the exclusivist attitude of the church to a realization that there are members of Christ's body *in addition* to the Worldwide Church of God.

All of this then begs the question: If the church has made such a transformation by the grace of God, why have there been such concerted efforts to adopt a revisionist position as to its founder and history and maintain a "Christian" heritage?

Yet, despite all the above, the most important reason for caution is Matthew 7:15-20. Jesus identified cultic and aberrational groups as "false prophets." He said we would know them by their fruit (v. 16) and that a rotten tree does not produce good fruit (v. 18). Yet the leadership today is telling us that the Worldwide Church of God is capable of producing good fruit. It has had to rework and relegate its "bad tree" history into a "good tree" image which just needs a little care and some pruning and fertilizer. Yet Jesus said, "Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire" (v. 19). He did not tell us to coddle, prune and nurture it.

If for no other reason, the words of Christ require that Christians do not uncritically accept this church's image transformation. Nevertheless, PFO rejoices and thanks God for the individuals who are being set free from the bondage of false doctrine and spiritual abuse — not because of this sect's claim of the "plain truth," but because of the atoning work of the Savior on Calvary's cross.

—MKG

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## NEWS UPDATES

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Lourdes and Fatima are promoting and the Jewish pool of John 5. At the Pool of Bethesda, no one was being encouraged to hold to teachings contrary to God's Word.

The message of both Lourdes and Fatima are messages supposedly from the Virgin Mary promoting veneration and prayers to her.

*The Catholic Almanac* under "Apparitions of the Blessed Virgin Mary" tells us that in Fatima, Portugal, "Mary appeared six times between May 13 and Oct. 13, 1917, to three children in a field called Cova da Iria near Fatima, north of Lisbon. She recommended frequent recitation of the Rosary."

Most are not aware that in the Rosary one prays to Mary these words: "Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death." There is only one Mediator for sinners (1 Timothy 2:5) and only one who can deal with our sins, that is the Lord Jesus (2 Corinthians 5:21).

The *Almanac* goes on saying that Mary urged "works of mortification for the conversion of sinners; called for devotion to herself under the title of the Immaculate Heart." Can our works of mortification convert sinners? Did not Christ command us to preach the Gospel to every creature (Matthew 28:19)? It is not our suffering and sacrifice that brings conversion to others but the preaching of His suffering and sacrifice and a sinners' hearty response to the Savior. It may cost us in time and effort to evangelize the lost but ultimately it is the Gospel that is the "power of God unto Salvation." Fatima's message is a total contradiction of the Gospel.

Fatima also calls for making holy communion on the first Saturday of every month and the *Almanac* informs us that: "Fatima, with its sanctuary and basilica, ranks with Lourdes as the greatest of Marian shrines."

So what about Lourdes? Hinn evidently approves of it. Lourdes is just the French version of Fatima. The *Almanac* gives its history: "Mary, identifying herself as the Immaculate Conception appeared 18 times between Feb. 11 and July 16, 1858, to 14-year-old Bernadette Soubirous at the grotto of Massabielle near Lourdes in southern France. Her message concerned the necessity of prayer and penance for the conversion of men."

It has been a longstanding controversy as to what, if anything, is really happening at these Marian shrines. Certainly there can be improvement of psychosomatic illness just through expectations. Because of the false beliefs being promoted so blatantly at both of these shrines, we cannot even rule out the demonic and the occultic (1 Timothy 4:1-3).

Hinn has admittedly slid into spiritism and necromancy so it should not be surprising that he is spiraling down into one error after the other. We can only wonder what will be next.

—GRF

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## BOOKS IN REVIEW

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questions the prescripts of some noted, modern-day celebrities of the Christian faith. This book may unsettle some as it goes against the grain of the traditionally accepted views of guidance, but it's a call to return to believing that Scripture many learned as a child: "Your Word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path."

—MKG