

The Church of God Reform Movement

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The Problem

An anniversary is an ideal time to think about important events in the past and consider their impact on the present. January 16, 2011 marked the 25th anniversary of the death of Herbert W. Armstrong, the man who founded the Worldwide Church of God. Despite the fact that the church had survived more than 50 years of tragedies and triumphs, once Armstrong died, the Worldwide Church of God quickly disintegrated into many different splinter groups that continue to divide over and over and over again.

For example, on January 9, 2011, yet another official split occurred within the United Church of God, one of the many successors of the Worldwide Church of God. According to some observers, this organization has experienced well over 40 splits in its relatively short, 16 year history, and many of the other splinter groups that came from the Worldwide Church of God have experienced similar problems.

All of this reminds me of a famous quote by George Santayana, who said, “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.” So, I think it's important that we take some time to review some important spiritual lessons that we can learn from the sad and tumultuous history of the Worldwide Church of God.

Our story begins back in the mid-1800s when several independent, Sabbath-keeping congregations in the American mid-west rejected the teachings and visions of Ellen G. White and withdrew from the Adventist movement. In 1884, these congregations came together to form the General Conference of the Church of God Seventh Day. This new organization began to spread across the United States, and eventually established its headquarters at Stanberry, Missouri.

In the 1920s, the church enjoyed a period of growth under the leadership of a man named Andrew Dugger. The church published a magazine called *The Bible Advocate* and an extensive collection of Bible studies called *The Bible Home Instructor*, which introduced prospective members to the doctrines of the church. In 1927, Herbert and Loma Armstrong began to fellowship with the Church of God Seventh Day, and eventually Herbert Armstrong became an ordained minister.

In 1933, a split occurred, and a rival group was established with headquarters at Salem, West Virginia. Herbert Armstrong followed his friend and mentor, Andrew Dugger, into this rival group, but there was friction between Armstrong and the governing body, and in 1938, Herbert Armstrong was defrocked for rebellion and heresy. Armstrong started his own organization called the Radio Church of God, which was later renamed the Worldwide Church of God.

Over the next 30 years, three important trends occurred within the Worldwide Church of God. First, attendance and income increased rapidly due to mass media evangelism. Armstrong was a pioneer in radio and television evangelism, and he also published his own magazine called *The Plain Truth*, which brought many new members into the organization. At its peak, the Worldwide Church of God had about 150,000 people and an annual operating budget of over \$200 million a year.

The second trend was that Herbert Armstrong introduced a series of new, controversial doctrines into the church. In 1983, Armstrong claimed that God had used him to establish 18 key truths in the church. Some of those 18 new doctrines included the establishment of hierarchical church government and some peculiar ideas regarding the nature of God, human deification, spiritual rebirth and the doctrine of British-Israelism.

The third development was a phenomenon that some people have referred to as prediction addiction. Herbert Armstrong claimed that he was a prophet and that God had uniquely inspired

him to understand the lost key that unlocked Bible prophecy. To prove his point, Armstrong made numerous, specific predictions and gave specific dates or general time limits within which they would occur.

Based on these three trends (the rapid growth of the church, the introduction of new doctrines, and a series of specific prophetic predictions), the Worldwide Church of God proclaimed that Herbert Armstrong was God's true apostle, the end-time Elijah who would restore all things before the Second Coming of Jesus Christ.

Now, anyone who claims to be an apostle or prophet places himself in a very special category. That individual must either be accepted as a divine messenger from God who must be obeyed without question or else he is a servant of Satan who must be totally rejected. There can be no middle ground.

The Bible teaches that the church must test such an individual to make sure that his behavior and teachings are consistent with Scripture, and that his predictions are accurately fulfilled. Every aspect of that person's life and teachings are fair game for evaluation.

For example, in 1 John 4:1, the apostle John said, "Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world." In Revelation 2:2, Jesus Christ said to the church at Ephesus, "I know your deeds and your toil and perseverance, and that you cannot tolerate evil men, and you put to the test those who call themselves apostles, and they are not, and you found them to be false." Note that Jesus commended the church for testing those who called themselves apostles.

In Matt 7:15-16, Jesus also said, "Beware of the false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits. Grapes are not gathered from thorn bushes nor figs from thistles, are they?" So, we need to look at their fruits, in other words, their works.

As I said, the Worldwide Church of God enjoyed a 30 year period of growth, but in the 1970s, everything began to unravel. Herbert Armstrong and his son, Garner Ted, were caught in a series of well-publicized doctrinal, prophetic and moral failures. There were two major splits in the Worldwide Church of God, and in 1979, the state of California tried to remove Herbert Armstrong from power. The church managed to survive each crisis and continued on until Armstrong died on January 16, 1986.

By this time, church members began to realize that Christ was not going to return during Armstrong's lifetime. They began to question his teachings and his predictions, and they began to scatter. The new administration took church in a different direction. By 1994, the Worldwide Church of God had dropped most of Armstrong's 18 new truths, and in 1995, the church began rejecting core doctrines the Church of God Seventh Day.

So, the members the Worldwide Church of God scattered to the wind. Many of them ended up in small splinter groups that continue to split over and over again. Some joined the Church of God Seventh Day. Others began attending messianic groups. A few joined the Seventh Day Adventist church, while others joined local Protestant churches. A few became Orthodox Jews and some even became complete atheists. Ironically, the Church of God Seventh Day is now the largest and fastest-growing Sabbatarian Church of God group with a total membership of about 150,000 people.

The Cause

I think it's important to ask what went wrong in the Worldwide Church of God that led to this 25 year period of disintegration. Having watched this nauseating drama play out for more than 35 year now, I believe that there were three key problems that led to the demise of the

Worldwide Church of God.

The first problem involved serious spiritual blind spots. The Worldwide Church of God actually had many positive qualities. We were very zealous and well organized; you had to be in order to conduct the Feast of Tabernacles with over 150,000 people gathered together in multiple locations throughout the world each and every year. We were also very obedient to God's law and church government; we cared about obeying God. And, we were also a very generous and tight-knit group. There was a real love for the brethren in those days.

But, the Worldwide Church of God also had corresponding negative qualities. We were very zealous, but we could also be very unbalanced in our behavior. We were well organized, but some leaders took advantage of that and were very controlling in their leadership style. We were very obedient to church government, but some leaders misused their power over the church because we were too submissive. Many people were generous to the point of being gullible, and the leadership took advantage of that as well. We were a tight-knit group, but we could also be very cultic, building up walls between us and the outside world, insulating ourselves from others. And, unfortunately, many people placed the leadership of the church on a pedestal so high that they were considered infallible. At one point, the leadership actually claimed that they were above the law and were answerable to no man.

The Bible has quite a bit to say about spiritual blind spots. In Matthew 7:3-5, Jesus said, "Why do you look at the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' and behold, the log is in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye." In Luke 11:34-36, Jesus also said, "The lamp of the body is the eye. Therefore, when your eye is good, your whole body also is full of light. But when your eye is bad, your body also is full of darkness. Therefore take heed that the light which is in you is not darkness. If then your whole body is full of light, having no part dark, the whole body will be full of light, as when the bright shining of a lamp gives you light."

The church boldly claimed to have the answers to the world's questions and problems whether we knew what we were talking about or not. We had an enormous blind spot. We looked out at the rest of the world and said, "Here, let me help you take that speck out of your eye," and we were completely oblivious to the tree trunk that was jammed into our own eye socket.

Now, this problem is not unique to the Worldwide Church of God; in fact, any Christian can develop a blind spot, but as time went on, the situation within the church got progressively worse, and deep spiritual darkness became institutionalized within the fabric of the organization.

As I said, any Christian can develop a spiritual blind spot especially in areas of self interest. For example, I have seen ministers, whose salaries depended on tithes, preach in favor tithing using grossly exaggerated arguments, and conversely, I have seen church members devise grossly exaggerated arguments against tithing in order to deny their biblical responsibility to support the ministry financially.

This problem can also affect us areas like human sexuality; for example, the Bible tells Christians not to be unequally yoke with unbelievers and not get married outside the faith, but it is very easy, when you're single, to find yourself attracted to someone who is not a Christian and then start reasoning around God's commandments oblivious to the spiritual danger.

So, anyone can develop spiritual blind spots especially in areas of self interest, but we must be honest with Scripture. If you find yourself becoming angry, defensive or argumentative about

a particular teaching in the Bible, the odds are pretty good that you have a spiritual blind spot in that particular area.

The second problem with the Worldwide Church of God was poor leadership. Over the years, many people have documented a very long list of doctrinal, prophetic and moral failures that have completely discredited Armstrong's apostolic claims. Often, an organization will take on many of the positive or negative qualities of its leader, and the Worldwide Church of God became a breeding ground for a variety of spiritual pathologies.

Notice what Peter said about the topic of leadership in 2 Peter 3:15-16, “and regard the patience of our Lord as salvation; just as also our beloved brother Paul, according to the wisdom given him, wrote to you, as also in all his letters, speaking in them of these things, in which are some things hard to understand, which the untaught and unstable distort, as they do also the rest of the Scriptures, to their own destruction. You therefore, beloved, knowing this beforehand, be on your guard so that you are not carried away by the error of unprincipled men and fall from your own steadfastness.” So, this passage gives us a clear warning to beware of ignorant, unstable and unprincipled men.

Many of the ministers that I encountered in the Worldwide Church of God were either incompetent or corrupt or both. For example, the minister who baptized my wife was later accused of sexual misconduct and was forced to resign from the ministry in disgrace, and he was not alone. The leadership of the Worldwide Church of God was prone to materialism, greed, selfish ambition, arrogance and a judgmental attitude. Many were physically or verbally abusive. Some were caught stealing or misusing church funds while others were chronic liars, alcoholics or sexual predators.

Many ministers were avid Bible readers, but they did not know how to properly interpret or apply Scripture; as a result, many of these men taught wild conspiracy theories or wacky prophetic speculation, and they gave people dangerous advice about serious personal problems. As a result, many church members suffered needless financial ruin, divorce, sickness, and even death because of these men.

The third problem that led to the demise of the Worldwide Church of God was stubborn self-righteousness and an unwillingness to repent. Over the years, many people in the church saw these serious problems and fought to correct them, but the leadership steadfastly resisted them. In the end, many reformers were either silenced or forced out of the church altogether. As time went on, the situation just got worse and worse.

Now, sin ultimately separates man from his Creator and man from his neighbor. When you see division occurring in a church, know for certain that sin is lurking somewhere just beneath the surface. God is patient and just; He will warn people about their sins and give them a chance to repent, but if people refuse to change their ways, He will eventually execute terrible judgment.

For example, in Revelation 2:5, Jesus told the church at Ephesus, “...remember from where you have fallen, and repent and do the deeds you did at first; or else I am coming to you and will remove your lampstand out of its place—unless you repent.”

In Revelation 2:20-22, Jesus Christ told the church at Thyatira, “...I have this against you, that you tolerate the woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess, and she teaches and leads My bond-servants astray so that they commit acts of immorality and eat things sacrificed to idols. I gave her time to repent, and she does not want to repent of her immorality. Behold, I will throw her on a bed of sickness, and those who commit adultery with her into great tribulation, unless they repent of her deeds.”

In Revelation 3:16, Jesus told the church at Laodicea, “I know your deeds, that you are

neither cold nor hot; I wish that you were cold or hot. So because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of My mouth.”

After Herbert Armstrong died in 1986, the new administration began to take the church in a different direction. Many longstanding problems were finally addressed, but as time went on, the doctrinal changes became increasingly controversial until at last, in 1995, the fundamental teachings of the Church of God were gone, and people abandoned the Worldwide Church of God in droves. Many people, myself included, felt that the new administration had tossed the baby out with the proverbial bathwater, and we set out to reassess the situation.

In 1995, I adopted a rule which has served me very well over the years; you can call it Richard’s Rule if you like, and it goes like this: don’t criticize someone else’s teaching unless you can teach their position as well as or better than they can. I came to see that the only way to get to the bottom of an issue is to look it from all sides and then honestly follow the facts wherever they lead no matter how uncomfortable that might prove to be.

So, from 1998 to 2004, I undertook a program of formal theological training at an accredited graduate seminary and received a Master of Arts in Biblical Studies. After many years of study, I came to four very interesting conclusions.

First, I believe that many churches do a better job of training their ministers for ministry than we typically do within the Church of God. Ministers who attend an accredited Bible college or seminary with a theologically conservative worldview are often better equipped to research the Bible, prepare sermons or counsel church members than we are in the Church of God. So, we can learn a great deal from other churches as far as professional ministerial development is concerned.

Second, I came to see that all of Armstrong’s 18 new truths were either borrowed or plagiarized from other sources; there was nothing actually original in Armstrong’s teachings. This would not have been a problem if Armstrong had acknowledged his sources, but he had claimed that God had uniquely inspired him to understand these new truths, which was clearly not the case at all.

Third, all of Armstrong’s 18 new doctrines have some kind of theological problem associated with them. Armstrong was not a trained theologian, so he was prone to making some rather amateurish mistakes. Some of these problems are trivial, while others are completely fatal. It will take years of careful research by trained and unbiased scholars within the Church of God to sort this all out. Now that Armstrong has been dead for over 25 years, church members are more open-minded about studying for advanced degrees and correcting error when necessary.

Finally, I was surprised to learn that many Protestant theologians actually agree with the Church of God on a variety of topics. For example, the Church of God Seventh Day and the Seventh Day Adventist church both teach the doctrine of annihilationism; in the late 20th century, John Stott and Clark Pinnock also came out in favor of this doctrine; many evangelical Christians now consider this doctrine to be a legitimate interpretation.

The Church of God Seventh Day also teaches the doctrine of Resistible Grace, which was championed by Jacob Arminius, John Wesley, and the Salvation Army. The Church of God Seventh Day and the Seventh Day Adventist church both developed from the Millerite movement of the early nineteenth century, so it is not surprising that they teach the doctrine of premillennialism along with such notable Protestant theologians as John Darby, Charles Ryrie, and George Eldon Ladd.

The Solution

This raises another important question: where do we go from here? As I said, other churches have faced the same kinds of problems that we have; they learned how to overcome these problems, and we can benefit from their experience.

If I were to propose a list of solutions for the Church of God Reform Movement, it would include some of the following points. First, we need to drop the hierarchical pattern of church government used by the Worldwide Church of God and return to a general conference structure. Hierarchical church government tends to place too much power into the hands of too few individuals without any safeguards for the members. A general conference structure also has weaknesses, but it provides greater accountability and has served the needs of the Church of God Seventh Day, the Seventh Day Adventist church and the Southern Baptists for many years, and we can learn from their experience.

I also firmly believe that congregations should be governed by a plurality of elders rather than having a single pastor with total control over the congregation. This is how congregations were originally organized in the first century; new elders were nominated by existing elders and were approved by the congregation before taking office. Hierarchical rule by a single bishop developed in the second century as churches began to follow the Roman pattern of government. Alexander Strauch has written an excellent explanation and scriptural defense of this approach to church government in his book titled *Biblical Eldership*.

The Church of God also needs to do a better job of training current and future leaders. We should examine the various degree programs that are offered in accredited Bible colleges and seminaries to see where we are falling short. Many of these schools offer courses through distance education that could be very useful to the widely scattered members of the Church of God. In the mean time, Didactic Ministries has developed an independent-study program to equip people with a basic foundation in biblical and theological studies without having to attend a college or university.

I also firmly believe that we need to establish the habit of inductive Bible study within the membership of the Church of God. Inductive Bible study is a structured process that teaches people how to properly study, interpret and apply the Bible for themselves. This would go a long way towards solving many of the problems that we have with misinterpretation and misapplication of Scripture.

I also believe that we need to foster spiritually healthy congregations. Over the years, many pastors and congregations have developed spiritually toxic and self-defeating behaviors that need to be purged from church life. After many years of research, a man named Christian Schwarz identified eight major characteristics of a spiritually healthy congregation in his book titled *Natural Church Development*. Some of these characteristics include: leaders who mentor and empower their disciples, Christians who sincerely practice their faith with zeal and enthusiasm, and worship services that are inspiring and encouraging. The *Natural Church Development* program seems like a sensible way to start improving the spiritual life of any congregation.

I also believe that we need to create a committee of trained biblical scholars that can research complex doctrinal questions as well as mentor the next generation of church leaders. We have too many amateurs in the church today who are creating confusion by teaching things that they don't understand; complex doctrinal questions should be handled by trained scholars who have the knowledge and skills to do legitimate theological research that can withstand the scrutiny of those outside the church.

We have many gifted individuals within the Church of God who would like to study for

advanced theological degrees, but they need good mentors who can guide them through the process so they don't end up losing their faith along the way. Ultimately, we need to find or establish an accredited Bible college that allows young people to prepare for ministry in a place that also honors God's Sabbaths and Holy Days.

The key to reforming the church is that people must be willing to listen and discuss new ideas with an open mind, but many people today don't want to face the truth. They become stuck in the past and would rather go on living a lie than admit that they were in error, but this is a self-defeating strategy. We need to be honest, confess error and move forward with solutions.

The Bible encourages us to learn from others and to evaluate ideas on the basis of Scripture. In 1 Thes 5:21, Paul said, "...examine everything carefully; hold fast to that which is good." In Acts 17:11, Luke said that the brethren at Berea were "more noble-minded than those in Thessalonica, for they received the word with great eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see whether these things were so." Proverbs 18:17 says, "The first to plead his case seems right, Until another comes and examines him." Proverbs 27:17 says, "Iron sharpens iron, So one man sharpens another." Exchanging and evaluating different ideas will lead to better understanding, but it only works if people are willing to listen.

In conclusion, the last 25 years have been a period of unrelenting disintegration for the former members of the Worldwide Church of God. If you want to understand the present you have to look at the past. The Worldwide Church of God had many good qualities, but there were also many serious spiritual problems, and it would be silly to pretend that they did not exist. Yet, that is exactly what many people are doing today.

Some have said that the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again expecting to get a different result; if we don't face the facts honestly and deal with these problems, we will continue to be haunted by failure and problems.

Other churches have faced these very same problems; they were not unique to the Worldwide Church of God. All Christians, all churches face spiritual challenges like these from time to time and learn how to overcome them. We can also solve these problems, but reform is going to require honesty, humility and an open mind.

I believe that Jesus Christ is sending a message to the Church of God; He is saying, "Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline; therefore be zealous and repent." Now is the time to make a commitment to work together for reform within the Church of God.