

Armstrongism

Cults, Sects, and New Religious Movements

Organizations associated with Armstrongism:

- Church of God, Pasadena (COGP)—Pasadena, Calif., www.church-of-god.org
- Church of God, International (COGI)—Tyler, Texas, www.cgi.org
- Intercontinental Church of God (ICOG)—Tyler, Texas, www.intercontinentalcog.org
- Living Church of God (LCG)—Charlotte, N.C., www.lcg.org
- Philadelphia Church of God (PCOG)—Edmond, Okla., www.pcog.org
- United Church of God (UCOG)—Arcadia, Calif., www.ucg.org
- Worldwide Church of God (WCOG)—Pasadena, Calif., www.wcg.org

Key Figure in History:

Herbert W. Armstrong, 1892-1986

Other Significant Figures:

- Garner Ted Armstrong (ICOG), 1930-2003
- Gerald Flurry (PCOG)
- Roy Holladay (UCOG)
- David Hulme (COGP)
- Roderick C. Meredith (LCG)
- Joseph W. Tkach, Sr. (WCOG), 1927-1995

Ministries Associated with Armstrongism:

- *The Key of David* television program (PCOG), www.keyofdavid.com
- *Armor of God* television program (COGI)
- Garner Ted Armstrong Evangelistic Association (ICOG), www.garnertedarmstrong.ws
- *Tomorrow's World* television program (LCG)

Key Publications:

- *The Philadelphia Trumpet* magazine (PCOG)
- *The Good News* magazine (UCOG)
- *The Plain Truth* magazine (WCOG)
- *21st Century Watch* magazine (ICOG)
- *Church of God News* (COGP)
- *Tomorrow's World* magazine (LCG)

Key Books:

- *Mystery of the Ages* by Herbert W. Armstrong
- *The United States and Britain in Prophecy* by Herbert W. Armstrong

Brief History of Armstrongism

The story of Armstrongism as a movement begins with the life of its namesake—Herbert W. Armstrong—who was born in Des Moines, Iowa, on July 31, 1892.

As a young man, Armstrong was involved in several failed business ventures. In 1924 he moved to Oregon, where he and his first wife, Loma, became involved in Adventism. He adopted several unusual doctrines, including Seventh-day Sabbatarianism and Old Testament dietary legalism. In 1926, Armstrong began an intense

study of the Bible during which he claimed to have discovered the *lost key* to scriptural interpretation. This *lost key* was actually an old discredited theory that the ten *lost tribes* of Israel can be identified in modern times as the peoples of Europe, the British Isles, and North America.

In 1931, Armstrong was ordained as a minister in the Church of God (Seventh-Day) (COGSD). He soon broke from that sect to form his own movement when his *lost tribes* theories were rejected by COGSD leaders. In 1934, he began a radio broadcast called *The World Tomorrow*,

founded the Radio Church of God—renamed the Worldwide Church of God (WCOG) in 1968—and, in 1935, started a free publication called *The Plain Truth*. He referred to himself as a modern apostle and later took the title of *pastor-general* of his church.

The movement grew, and, in 1947, Armstrong established Ambassador College in Pasadena, Calif. He later opened branch campuses in England and Texas.

Armstrong's son, Garner Ted Armstrong, a master communicator, took over *The World Tomorrow* radio broadcasts in 1963, and later expanded into international television. In 1972, Garner Ted Armstrong was suspended from his broadcasts for four months by his father for alleged sexual misconduct. Garner Ted Armstrong was excommunicated from his father's church in 1978, and founded the Church of God International (COGI) in Tyler, Texas. In 1995, he was dismissed by COGI and, in 1998, started another organization, the Intercontinental Church of God where he continued his television ministry until his death in 2003, at age 73.

In the 1970s, Herbert Armstrong was criticized by many inside and outside of the church for his extravagant lifestyle. In 1978, the WCOG was investigated by the state of California for mismanagement of funds, and in 1979 was placed in state receivership. After several years of close government scrutiny, the church returned to solvency under Armstrong's leadership.

Herbert W. Armstrong was 93 when he died in 1986 of old age. He was succeeded as *pastor-general* by Joseph W. Tkach (1927-1995). Over the following decade, Tkach and his successor, Joseph W. Tkach, Jr., led the Worldwide Church of God through significant theological and ecclesiastical reforms, renouncing most of the unorthodox teachings of Herbert W. Armstrong. Doctrines rejected included the *God-family* concept, British-Israelism, and legalistic Seventh-day Sabbatarianism. In 1993, the WCOG officially affirmed the historic Christian doctrine of the Trinity and, in 1997, was accepted for membership in the National Association of Evangelicals.

As a result of these changes, several splinter organizations—led by ex-members of the WCOG—were formed that continue to espouse Armstrong's unorthodox doctrines. Those neo-Armstrongist leaders and movements included Gerald Flurry of the Philadelphia Church of God, Roy Holladay of the United Church of God, and David Hulme of the Church of God—Pasadena, Calif.

Doctrines of Armstrongism

Authority

Herbert W. Armstrong taught that the Bible was a divinely inspired book and the authoritative Word of God. However, he taught that the key to interpreting it had been obscured by God until these last days when he, by divine inspiration, discovered it. Thus, Armstrong regarded himself as the only legitimate interpreter of Scripture and his movement as the only true church of God. Armstrong's

books and pamphlets are still distributed by Armstrongist groups and are regarded as authoritative.

Biblical Response

Christians agree that the Bible is the inspired and authoritative Word of God. However, Armstrong's claims to his singularly authoritative interpretation must be rejected. Many of his unusual doctrines are based on faulty biblical presuppositions. The Bible should be interpreted by sound principles of hermeneutics. Christians of all generations have had the capability of understanding its essential teachings (2 Tim. 3:16-17; 2 Pet. 1:19-21).

God is a Family

Herbert W. Armstrong taught an unusual theological concept saying that God presently consists of two separate individuals, the Father and His Son, Jesus Christ—excluding the Holy Spirit. These two comprise the *God-family*. According to Armstrong, the preexistent Jesus, called Melchizedek and Yahweh in the Old Testament, was born as a man.

Jesus Christ existed from all eternity but was subordinate to the Father. He was *born again* into the godhead at His resurrection, which was not physical, but only spiritual.

The Holy Spirit, according to Armstrong, is not divine and not a person. *It* is regarded merely as the spiritual extension of God, containing His essence and power.

Biblical Response

The one God is the personal, eternal, and infinite Creator of all that exists. He exists eternally as a Trinity—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Jesus Christ is the virgin-born, incarnate Son of God, who existed eternally with the Father and the Holy Spirit. He lived a sinless life, willingly died on the cross as a sacrifice for the sin of humanity, and rose again physically from the dead.

The Holy Spirit is the third Person of the Trinity and is coeternal with the Father and the Son. He convicts unbelievers of their need for salvation and indwells believers at conversion to empower them for effective and holy living (Deut. 6:4; Matt. 28:19; 1 Cor. 8:6; 12:4-6; 15:1-8).

Mankind: Potential Members of the God-Family

According to Armstrong, human beings have no immortal soul. Rather, they cease to exist at death. Mankind is naturally evil, but may join the God-family if they accept the redemption made by Christ, are obedient and faithful to God's laws, and are eventually *born again* into membership in the God-family.

Biblical Response

Human beings are created in the image of God and, as such, have an immortal soul. Nonetheless, people are by nature sinners, in need of the free gift of eternal life (Gen. 1:26-27; Rom. 3:23).

Salvation

Herbert W. Armstrong taught that salvation is not a present reality, but totally future. He stated that no one, except Jesus, is yet *saved* or *born again*. God will soon establish His *government of God* on earth led by Jesus Christ. Those who have faith in Christ and are obedient to God's commandments will be resurrected from the dead and *born again* into the God-family. Members are expected to observe the Seventh-day Sabbath and the Old Testament festivals.

Biblical Response

People are totally saved and *born again* as a past, present, and future reality when they repent of their sins and, by grace through faith, receive Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior (John 3:16; Rom. 10:9-10; Eph. 2:8-9; 1 Pet. 1:3, 23).

The Church

Herbert W. Armstrong taught that all Christian denominations are apostate and have lost the true biblical message of the *government of God*. He claimed that he restored the true gospel of Christ to the world in 1933. He claimed that his was, therefore, the only true movement of God in the world and was ordained by God to prepare the world for the return of Christ.

Biblical Response

There is no organization, denomination, or religious movement that can claim exclusive designation as the only true church. Christ's universal Church consists of all the redeemed in Jesus Christ in all of the ages. There is no evidence that Herbert W. Armstrong, or his movement, is uniquely ordained of God to proclaim an end-times message (Matt. 16:15-19; 1 Cor. 1:12-14; Eph. 2:19; 3:11-12).

Last Things

Herbert W. Armstrong taught an unusual form of biblical interpretation called *British-Israelism*, also called *Anglo-Israelism*. This novel view, which originated in the eighteenth century in England, says that the Western European peoples are descendants of the ten lost tribes of Israel. Specifically, the British and their North American offspring are the descendants of the tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh. The throne of the king or queen of England is believed to be the throne of King David—which means that they, and not the Jews, are the true inheritors of the prophetic promises of God to His chosen people. Thus, all end-time biblical prophecy must be seen through that perspective.

Armstrong also taught that a final world battle—Armageddon—will soon take place, after which Christ will return to establish the *government of God* on earth for 1000 years. At the close of the millennium, a final judgment will occur in which the wicked will be annihilated. The redeemed will inherit eternal life on a perfect earth. Eventually those who are *born again* will join the Father and Jesus in the godhead as God-family.

Biblical Response

Armstrong's *British-Israel* interpretation of biblical prophecy has been discredited by many Hebrew and Greek scholars. There is no basis for maintaining that Europeans are the descendants of the lost tribes of Israel—or that the tribes were ever really lost.

The doctrine of eternal hell is affirmed. The saved will enjoy eternal life with Christ in heaven and the lost will suffer eternal punishment (Matt. 18:8-9; 25:41-46; Mark 9:43-48; John 3:16; 14:1-3; 2 Thess. 1:9; Rev. 20-22).

Witnessing to people influenced by Armstrongism

1. Have a clear understanding of your faith and the Bible. Learn basic biblical truths and be able to defend your beliefs from Scripture.
2. Reaffirm the Bible alone as your authority. State that any doctrines or practices that cannot be confirmed scripturally, using sound principles of interpretation, are not valid. State that no one interpreter of the Bible has exclusive understanding or any special *key* to interpretation.
3. Know the basic teachings of Herbert W. Armstrong and the various organizations that espouse them. Learn how Armstrong deviated from biblical teaching on many essential issues.
4. Define all terms thoroughly both from the historic Christian perspective and from the Armstrong perspective. Be prepared to demonstrate how they differ.
5. Determine the person's level of commitment to Armstrongism on doctrines and organization. Many people not holding formal membership in one of the Armstrongist groups may nonetheless be influenced by the literature or broadcasts of Armstrongist ministries.
6. Build a personal relationship with the Armstrongist follower. Using the Bible, discuss various doctrinal issues as they arise. Focus on the essential issues of the nature of God, the Person and work of Jesus Christ, and the way of salvation and spiritual rebirth.
7. Present the clear biblical gospel of salvation—by grace through faith—to your Armstrongist friend. Show that salvation is entirely a free gift, and not a matter of adherence to legalistic precepts or membership in any organization.
8. Pray for the Holy Spirit to lead you in your encounter and to open the heart of your Armstrongist friend to the biblical truth of the gospel.

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A Southern Baptist Convention entity supported by the Cooperative Program and the Annie Armstrong Easter Offering[®]

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