



The Church That Changed

By Rex Morgan

Regular readers of *Inside Life* may have noticed that the name of our publisher has changed as of this issue from the Worldwide Church of God to Grace Communion International. This is an opportune time to recount the story of a remarkable denominational transformation that has been called 'unprecedented in church history'.



Herbert W. Armstrong, founder of the Worldwide Church of God

The Worldwide Church of God was founded in the USA in 1934 by Herbert W. Armstrong. He established 'The World Tomorrow' radio programme, and *The Plain Truth* magazine, both of which spread rapidly around the world and were available in New Zealand from the 1960s to the 1990s. 'The World Tomorrow' later moved to television and became one of the top two religious programmes in America, and the magazine circulation rose to several million every month. In NZ circulation of *The Plain Truth* peaked in 1986 at 65 000, about one for every 20 households in the nation.

The church held a number of unorthodox beliefs, although they were all believed very sincerely, and backed up by quotations from the scriptures.¹ After Herbert Armstrong's death in 1986 at the age of 93, church leaders began to research and question some of these long-standing teachings, and came to see that they

were in error. This confronted them with a major challenge. What should they do: keep the new understanding to themselves rather than upsetting the church members who were comfortable with their beliefs? Mr Armstrong's successor, Joseph Tkach Sr took the courageous path of promptly explaining to the church faithful that many of their deeply held and cherished beliefs were based on a misinterpretation of certain scriptures.

Thousands of church members were unable to agree with the changes and left the church, some of them starting up their own denominations. These groups later split further into diverse splinter churches and organisations. The Worldwide Church of God issued public apologies for the errors it had taught in the past.²

These remarkable changes soon caught the attention of other churches, several of which quickly and graciously welcomed the church into the fold of orthodoxy. In an article in *Christianity Today* entitled 'From the Fringe to the Fold', church historian, professor and author Ruth A. Tucker said: 'Never before in the history of Christianity has there been such a complete move to orthodox Christianity by an unorthodox fringe church'.³ She added: 'It's a gripping story that challenges Christians of all denominations to examine their beliefs and practices with openness and honesty'.



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Hank Hanegraaff, president of the Christian Research Institute, stated: 'This is unprecedented in church history. It's the very kind of thing that those who have given their lives in ministry to the kingdom of the cults hope for...They're charting brand-new territory'.⁴ Speaking of Joseph Tkach Sr, Hank Hanegraaff said: 'As successor to Worldwide Church of God founder Herbert W. Armstrong, Tkach boldly led the Pasadena, California-based church from cultism into Christianity...He was a man who risked losing his reputation, his livelihood, his career, and world respect in his all-out devotion to finding and proclaiming the truth'.⁵

'Grace lies at the heart of our values and mission... Our spiritual unity with God...is reflected in the word Communion... International identifies us as a unified body of believers...'

Dr D. James Kennedy, celebrated televangelist and author, and senior minister at Coral Ridge Presbyterian Church in Florida, remarked: 'The changes that have occurred within the Worldwide Church of God are far more intensive than those that brought about the Protestant Reformation'. Dr John R. Holland, president of the International Church of the Foursquare Gospel stated: 'I praise God for His work of renewal in, and restoration of, the Worldwide Church of God. I believe this is one of the great miracles in the body of Christ in this century'.

Recently the church decided to change its name to reflect its new identity following such a profound transformation. Grace Communion International was chosen as the new name.

Current denominational president Joseph Tkach Jr explains: 'Grace lies at the heart of our values and mission as a transformed church. Our spiritual unity with God and with one another is reflected in the word Communion. The word International identifies us as a unified body of believers who span the globe, sharing a common history and journey of faith. We are a church that God radically transformed. Our new name is consistent with that transformation and aptly describes what God has made of our fellowship'.⁶

It is hugely disconcerting for anyone to realise that fundamental principles on which they have based their lives are mistaken. It takes courage for an individual to face up to huge errors like this, let alone an entire organisation admitting mistakes of this magnitude, especially when they threaten the future viability and existence of the institution. The fact that this happened can give hope to families of people caught up in all kinds of cultish beliefs. God is able to change the lives not only of individuals but even of entire organisations by giving them the humility to admit they are wrong.

'The church that changed' has reduced in numbers by more than 50% because of defections following the changes, but still maintains 50,000 members in approximately 100 countries, and is beginning to grow again in many parts of the world.

Church members who have lived through the changes are now able to look back on a journey that has involved the agonising pain of loss mixed with the joy of fresh discovery and renewed zeal. They have a deep understanding of the way people can be led into questionable beliefs. It is incumbent on each of us to examine our personal beliefs and be humble enough to admit error when it is proved, no matter how much it will cost us, and regardless of how right we thought we were!

Notes

- 1 Comprehensive details of the doctrinal changes can be viewed at www.gci.org/aboutus/history
- 2 An apology can be viewed at www.gci.org/aboutus/forgiveus
- 3 *Christianity Today*, July 15, 1996
- 4 *The Christian Research Journal*, winter 1996.
- 5 *Christian Research Newsletter 9, no. 1*, winter/spring 1996, p. 13.
- 6 The church's current teachings are outlined at www.gci.org/aboutus/beliefs



Joseph Tkach, president of Grace Communion International