CHAPTER EIGHT

After the death of Herbert Armstrong in 1986, what happened next?

This is the period of time that most interests those who were members of the Worldwide Church of God at some time during the 1980s–90s. It covers the most traumatic events in that church’s history for many, because many assumed that God’s Work would move forward and continue to reflect the tenets of Herbert Armstrong, even under the stewardship of a new Pastor General. How wrong they were.

Many other writers have already documented the blow-by-blow events that occurred after Mr. Joseph Tkach took the reins as Pastor General of the Worldwide Church of God in 1986. In short, he and his son, Joseph Tkach, Jr., used the ensuing decade to dismantle most of what Herbert Armstrong had built since the 1930s. For those who remained loyal members of the church through the 1980s and respected the legacy of Mr. Armstrong, it was traumatic to see every teaching that had set that church apart destroyed one by one. A number of ministers who did not agree with the changes eventually separated and started their own groups, later writing in detail about their own experiences and rationales, and lamenting the treachery they witnessed in the actions of the new Pastor General. Anyone who cares to delve into the weeds of that story can find ample documentation by the ones who lived through it.

But this particular work postulates (as you will see in the chapters to come) that the seeds of destruction of the Worldwide Church of God were already planted long before Mr. Armstrong died. All of those who became "shocked" in the 1990s at how easy it was to change every doctrine of the church after 1986 were simply never clued in to the insidious weaknesses which had been imbedded
decades before. In other words, long before Mr. Armstrong died, doctrinal changes that he himself approved—and was never able to rescind—set the precedent for Pastors General to make any and all changes they chose to, and at will. If you want a church that does not change its teachings, then do not ever begin to change its teachings! And if you do start changing major doctrinal teachings, do not then be surprised if a successor follows the same example and changes even more. If God inspired your doctrine, it is divine. If not, then none of it matters anyway.

Mr. Armstrong had always touted his willingness to change when shown that he was wrong, but up until the 1960s, that concept was always applied to rooting out past Protestant practices that he had inadvertently brought into the church from his upbringing, before he was shown by God what was the real truth of the matter. But once he claimed that God had shown him a new cardinal principle by revelation through his Bible study, that principle was thereafter cited as a doctrine put into the Church by Jesus Christ. If his claim is true that Jesus Christ put many of those doctrines into the Radio Church of God originally, then how can they later be overturned through "better" human scholarship? Either Jesus Christ gave it as a divine gift, or else He did not. "Growing in grace and knowledge" can never mean casting out what Christ revealed as being holy. That whole line of reasoning is nonsense. And yet that is exactly the concept that became institutionalized during the 1970s in the WCG, twenty years before the Tkaches capitalized upon that same notion and used it to totally "transform" the church.

If doctrinal change to a church is like an iceberg piercing the hull of a giant ocean liner, then the Worldwide Church of God was already like the sinking Titanic beginning way back in the early 1970s. By the early 1990s, the ship had already been taking on water for almost twenty years, even though the "back on track" years made it appear "topside" that everything was still OK. When it finally broke apart and sank in the 1990s, the passengers (WCG members) who loved that ship were shocked and disillusioned. They had been told the ship was seaworthy all along. When the waters finally
started covering their ankles, ministers started jumping ship, becoming captains of their own lifeboats, and offering safe havens for those who sought to hold onto some portion of Mr. Armstrong’s legacy.

So all of those holding to the idea that everything was just grand until Mr. Armstrong died, are like those rearranging deck chairs on a great sinking ship, denying that water is flooding in below decks. There are many who have written their accounts of this time period, from the perspective of ones believing that the first real damage to the WCG occurred after 1986. But if it is true that the proverbial iceberg actually struck twenty years earlier, then we prefer to spend more of our time on those events. Let the others parse every nuance of the final death throes of the 1990s, which they believe was so new and totally unexpected. Here you will see instead the evidence of why it was not new at all, and why it should have been anything but unexpected.

However, to provide a necessary summary of events of the 1980s–90s for the record, here it is. Even as Part II of this work has tried to allow Mr. Armstrong to tell his own story—rather than to give prominence to his detractors—so will we document the aftermath of his death from the words of the succeeding Pastor General, because all we really need to know is found in his own account.

**In His Own Words**

In 1997, Joseph Tkach, Jr. wrote a book entitled, *Transformed by Truth*. It tells the story of the actions of he and his father as they led the Worldwide Church of God after 1986. The citation on the back cover tells it all:

For nearly seventy years the Worldwide Church of God, founded by Herbert W. Armstrong, preached a "different gospel." Then, in December 1994, eight years after Armstrong’s death, the church publicly renounced its
unorthodox teachings, embracing historic Christianity. What happened? Toward the end of his life, Armstrong himself expressed the first doubts. Soon falsehood after falsehood fell away and the plain truth prevailed. In this fast-paced narrative, Joseph Tkach, son of Armstrong’s handpicked successor and head of the church, tells this remarkable account of the transforming power of the Gospel.

First, it is interesting that Mr. Tkach would make it sound as if Mr. Armstrong formed a deathbed doubt about the doctrinal basis upon which the entire church had been founded since the 1930s. Really? Quite unlikely. It is always easy to put words into the mouth of someone who is now dead and can no longer speak for himself. The last writings of Herbert Armstrong tell quite a different story, as we have already seen.

From Mr. Tkach’s Transformed by Truth, here is an abbreviated history of key events after 1986:

- Joseph Tkach, Sr. begins to pull foundational church literature from circulation from 1986 to 1994, including Mystery of the Ages and The United States and Britain in Prophecy.
- Joseph Tkach, Sr. preaches his "Christmas Eve sermon" in December 1994, finally "coming clean" about his plan to repudiate the need for God’s people to keep the seventh-day Sabbath or to tithe, and approving Christmas observance and other Protestant doctrines as well. This single sermon removed any doubt about the real agenda for the future.
- Influential ministers begin to defect and establish competing churches from as early as 1989, but especially after the Christmas Eve sermon in 1994.
- The resulting massive hemorrhage of members and tithe money forces the Worldwide Church of God to terminate many employees and begin selling property and assets.
• Ambassador College achieves accreditation in 1994, becoming Ambassador University, but then is forced to close altogether in 1997 for lack of funds.
• Joseph Tkach, Sr. dies of cancer in September 1995, and his son, Joseph, Jr. takes over as Pastor General.
• Joseph Tkach, Jr. never considers that he has made a mistake, but sees his actions and those of his father as courageous, necessary steps to bring the church out of doctrinal error and into the true light of Jesus Christ.

Providing specifics about the membership and financial losses, Mr. Tkach writes:

The Worldwide Church of God reached its peak attendance in 1988—two years after Mr. Armstrong’s death—with 126,800 members and 150,000 in attendance. Those figures stayed relatively stable until 1992, when a slight dip was noted. By 1994 church attendance had slipped to 109,600 . . . and then came the Christmas Eve sermon. In the year following that milestone message, attendance plummeted to 66,400 members, and by the time of this writing it had leveled off at around 58,000.

Our membership losses have resulted in a corresponding drop in income. Receipts worldwide in 1990 amounted to more than $211 million. By 1994, the year immediately preceding "The Sermon," income stood at about $164.6 million. The following year income dropped to $103.4 million. In this past year our receipts totaled about $68.5 million. We expect a national income of $38 million in 1997 (Transformed by Truth, pp. 71–72).

It is interesting that Mr. Tkach claims there was never any "blueprint" they were following in order to transform the church. He claims that he and his father were merely following God’s lead, step by step. They did not know where it would lead. The following citation is very interesting:
Early on, there were some astute members who saw that the first two or three changes we made required that other changes would soon have to be made. They accurately predicted most of the corrections we announced in the following three or four years. Yet at the time we saw none of this. These people would make their predictions, and we would reply: "That's silly. Why are you saying we're going to change things that have been integral to our identity as a denomination?" We steadfastly denied we were even thinking about such changes, for the simple reason that we weren't considering any such thing. But as time went on and we answered more questions, we ended up making some of the very changes our critics had predicted. It looked as if they had more credibility than we did; I freely admit it appeared as though we really did have some sort of hidden agenda, that we weren't telling the whole story (Transformed by Truth, p. 84).

Mr. Tkach ends his account with the following announcement:

As I conclude these words in early May 1997, we have just received a press release from the National Association of Evangelicals. Its first two sentences read: "The Board of Directors of the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE) has voted overwhelmingly to accept the Worldwide Church of God (WCG), headquartered in Pasadena, California, into membership. The application process included examination of doctrinal changes which have taken place in the once-controversial denomination" (Transformed by Truth, p. 200).

After 1997, this newly transformed church would continue to root out every possible vestige of Herbert Armstrong's teachings, and Mr. Tkach and his staff would continue to apologize to the world—and especially to the Protestant establishment—for ever having believed Herbert Armstrong's interpretation of Scripture.
By 2009, it was finally time to abandon the moniker, *Worldwide Church of God*, and to adopt a new name that would truly demonstrate how far removed they had become from their past history. Thus, Mr. Tkach announced their new name: *Grace Communion International*. To this day, they are still running from their religious roots and seeking to be accepted among the traditional Christian denominations.