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Lessons From a Church Meltdown

Almost overnight the Worldwide Church of God lost half of its membership in 1995. Why? And what really happened?

BY SAMUELE BACCHIOCCHI

In 1995 the Worldwide Church of God nearly self-destructed. About 50,000 members and 500 pastors—nearly half the church's membership—either quit or were disfellowshipped or fired.

How come?

Because church leaders declared that many of their foundational, distinctive truths, such as the seventh-day Sabbath, tithing, holy days, and the distinction between clean and unclean meats, were no longer true. Leaders introduced the changes to bring the denomination more in line with mainstream Protestantism.

As one might expect, the fallout has been enormous, and still continues. Beyond the membership losses, tremendous financial losses are ensuing, causing the suspension of the church's telecast, *The World Tomorrow*; the reduction in circulation of their outreach magazine, *The Plain Truth*, from 7 million to less than a half million; and a substantial drop in enrollment at their Texas-based Ambassador University—which they now have up for sale.

A group of former WCG ministers and elders, however, have not been willing to let their distinctive beliefs fade away. At a spring 1995 meeting they proposed and voted to create a new denomination called the United Church of God (UCG). So far the new denomination has attracted about 20,000 former WCG members, and the number is growing daily.

This dramatic division and weakening of the Worldwide Church of God gives rise to two questions that should be of interest to Seventh-day Adventists:

1. What contributed to the sudden split?
2. What lessons can Seventh-day Adventists learn from the sad experience of a church that has held in common with us such beliefs as the seventh-day Sabbath, tithing, clean and unclean meats, and the importance of obedience to God's law?

To find answers, I interviewed leader after leader of the newly formed denomination while I attended and spoke at two of their Sabbath conferences. This year I will speak at six more.

The contact has allowed me to appreciate the sincerity and commitment of the ministers who lost their employment and of members who were disfellowshipped, all of them for choosing to remain true to their beliefs.

While listening to the heartbreaking stories of families split by the new teachings, I wondered what would happen to our

THE ISSUE

The near self-destruction of a church that holds many beliefs in common with us summons us to ask: "Could it ever happen to us?"

denomination if General Conference leaders promoted the abandonment of such fundamental beliefs as the Sabbath, the sanctuary, the Spirit of Prophecy, tithing, and biblical authority. What percentage of our Seventh-day Adventist pastors and members would rather be fired or disfellowshipped than compromise their beliefs?

No one can tell. But we can resolve to prevent such a thing from happening by learning from the experience of the Worldwide Church of God.

To understand the WCG split, we must look at the church's past. The WCG was founded by Pastor Herbert W. Armstrong. He had been ordained in 1931 in the Church of God (Seventh Day), where he served until 1937, when he established his own independent church known at first as the Radio Church of God.

Pastor Armstrong then began publishing *The Plain Truth* magazine, and in 1947 he founded Ambassador College in Pasadena, California, which also became the church's headquarters.

Unlike the founders of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, who believed in a democratic form of church government, Armstrong believed in a hierarchical form. Armstrong dictated the beliefs, practices, and programs of the WCG until his death in 1986. After his death, church leaders continued with the hierarchical approach.

Before his death, Armstrong chose Joseph W. Tkach, Sr., as his successor (as pastor general), bypassing several close assistants who had aspired to the position. Tkach, Sr., enjoyed overwhelming support from the leaders and members for four or five years after his accession in 1986. But by 1992 signs of fundamental change began to appear.

The Assault Begins

Gradually church leaders withdrew Armstrong's publications from circulation. The new leaders modified the church's prophetic emphasis and adopted a more mainstream Protestant approach. Similarly, the church's emphasis on obedience to God's commandments shifted to the

acceptance of salvation by grace, irrespective of works of obedience.

In late 1994 leaders began an assault on the Sabbath, holy days, distinction between clean and unclean meats, and tithing.

Regarding the Sabbath, Joe Tkach, Jr., whom his father had appointed to preside over the ministry area (and successor to Tkach, Sr., who died late in 1995), asserted in a study paper published in February 1995, that "The question is, Does God tell His new covenant people to rest on the seventh day? The answer is no, He doesn't." Evidently Tkach, Jr., had adopted the popular view that the new covenant releases God's people from the obligation to observe His commandments.

Informed sources believe that these doctrinal changes were influenced by the so-called Azusa Pacific University theologians, those whom the church had sponsored through graduate degrees in theology and biblical studies, mostly at Azusa Pacific University. The WCG needed qualified teachers to gain accreditation for their Ambassador University, so they sent many to Azusa Pacific. Some of these young theologians also became part of Pastor General Tkach's administrative cabinet. Their avowed goal was to lead their church into the Evangelical mainstream by doing away with certain beliefs (such as Sabbathkeeping) that they considered vestiges of the old covenant.

At first, church loyalists preferred to think that Pastor General Tkach, Sr., was unaware of the "new theology" promoted by his administrative cabinet. Many others, however, recognized that the young Azusa Pacific University theologians were exerting an enormous influence on Tkach, Sr.

All doubts were finally resolved in December 1994 when Tkach, Sr., videotaped a sermon played in virtually all WCG congregations in early January 1995. In that sermon Tkach, Sr., made it clear that he had embraced the new theology and was now prepared to enforce it by firing and/or disfellowshipping recalcitrant pastors and church members. Upward

of 400 ministers resigned or were fired, and thousands of members were disfellowshipped. Many of these now belong to the newly formed denomination.

Lessons to Be Learned

As Seventh-day Adventists—who also keep the Sabbath and are preparing for Jesus' second advent—we can learn four important lessons from this traumatic experience.

1. Danger of a Hierarchical Structure.

Great danger lies in a hierarchical form of church government in which the decision-making process rests in the hands of a few leaders. Pastor General Tkach, Sr., exercised almost pontifical authority. A small administrative cabinet advised him, but ultimately he dictated what ministers ought to preach and what members should practice. Such an autocratic form of church government does not allow for any meaningful participation by the laity and clergy in the government of the church, and it rejects any type of dissent.

Several former ministers of the WCG said that they repeatedly requested Tkach, Sr., to convene a ministerial council to discuss the doctrinal changes, but their requests were rejected.

The strength of a church organization is measured by the degree of consensus and conviction among its members. These cannot be dictated from the top down; they must grow from the bottom up through involvement in the decision-making process.

The current hierarchical structure of the WCG reminds us of the Seventh-day Adventist administrative structure at the turn of the century. At that time a few General Conference leaders were exercising what Ellen G. White called "kingly power." Largely as a result of her timely counsels, the 1901 General Conference session effected a much-needed reorganization that allowed wider representation in the General Conference Executive Committee.

Church administrators will always be tempted to consolidate their power to facilitate the implementation of their



doctrinal revisions are ever needed. Churches that are alive will grow in their understanding of revealed truths. They build upon the doctrinal foundation laid down by their pioneers.

However, proposed doctrinal changes should be widely discussed and examined, and adopted only with the broad support of the membership. Doctrinal changes dictated by one or a few, against the will of the majority, can split a church and destroy its credibility.

policies and programs. To protect our leaders from this corrupting influence, we must preserve our current representative system of church government, with all its checks and balances.

2. Influence of Liberal Theologians.

It takes only a few liberal theologians placed in key positions to influence doctrinal changes that can prove divisive to a church. According to informed sources, three very liberal theologians (Azusa Pacific University theologians) close to Pastor General Tkach, Sr., advised him to implement doctrinal changes.

The influence of liberal theologians who question the authority of the Bible and the validity of their denominational beliefs is felt in practically every denomination, including the Seventh-day Adventist Church. This is part of the price churches are paying today for promoting higher education. To receive accreditation for their church-related colleges and universities, younger churches especially have to sponsor qualified students to earn graduate degrees in institutions of higher learning

where humanism, secularism, and higher criticism prevail.

When exposed to these ideologies daily for several years, it is difficult for anyone to remain unscathed. So it is not surprising that some of the promising young people sent to earn degrees in such institutions return with liberal views not compatible with their church's teachings.

The solution to the problem is not in doing away with higher education. There is no merit in ignorance. Rather, the solution is to ensure that those who serve in academic institutions or administrative positions are committed to the beliefs and standards of the church they serve. People who during their graduate studies have become critical or even cynical of the beliefs of their church cannot and should not serve in their church. To fulfill their church's expectations would require them to be untrue to their conscience and beliefs; teaching divergent beliefs would be unfair to the church that pays their salaries.

3. Change Requires Consensus.

The underlying issue is not whether

Unfortunately, the WCG made changes in the wrong way, by dictating doctrinal changes from the top down rather than by achieving gradual consensus from the bottom up.

Furthermore, in their desire to purge the church of undesirable beliefs, they went too far by adopting a dispensationalist view that rejects such legitimate Old Testament institutions as the Sabbath, tithing, and the distinction between clean and unclean meats.

Imagine what would happen if our General Conference president had authority to impose unilaterally some new theology worldwide. The result would be similar to what has happened in the WCG. Our representative form of church government makes it possible for major issues to be debated and voted by all delegates attending General Conference sessions.

Yet even our Adventist system needs some fine-tuning. A simple majority of 51 percent is hardly sufficient to approve the adoption or rejection of an important policy. To adopt a divisive policy rejected by 49 percent of the membership means to split the church down the middle.

Changes that impinge on fundamental biblical beliefs should have the support of a vast majority. A church's strength depends on its doctrinal cohesiveness. A church divided on important doctrinal or policy matters no longer represents the unity of the body of Christ. Its identity is blurred, its mission weakened, and its credibility destroyed. To a large extent this is what has happened to the WCG.

4. Dangers Arise Within.

Perhaps the most sobering lesson of all is that the greatest dangers to a church arise from itself. No pressures strictly from outside have brought the present turmoil in the WCG. No civil power or rival religion has dealt this blow. The damage has come from within. Could such a thing happen to our church as well?

The Bible has warned us of the dangers. Paul told the Ephesian elders, "I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves will arise men speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them. Therefore be alert" (Acts 20:29-31, RSV).

Likewise Ellen G. White noted, "We have far more to fear from within than from without. The hindrances to strength and success are far greater from the church itself than from the world" (*Selected Messages*, book 1, p. 122).

In recent memory some of our own best and brightest members have challenged our teachings on the sanctuary, on prophetic interpretation, and on the Spirit of Prophecy.

Further, as a result of what some have taught and what others have failed to

teach, a number of our people are treating the Sabbath less as a *holy day* and more as a *holiday*. Some are losing a sense of the nearness of Christ's return. Many are ignoring the church's longstanding call for high standards in matters of dress, adornment, entertainment, and temperance, choosing to look and live like the world rather than as followers of the Saviour who calls them to holiness.

The experience of the Worldwide Church of God should serve as a warning to Seventh-day Adventists. We must learn these valuable lessons to prevent such painful trauma in our own church.

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Regeneration



BY ROSY TETZ

An innocent starfish is minding its own business, maybe thinking about finding a little something to eat, when all of a sudden a vicious conch leaps out of its shell and attacks, grabbing the starfish by one of its five arms. "Oh!" you say. "It looks as though the conch has caught itself some supper." Well, not necessarily.

The quick-thinking starfish breaks off its own arm—the arm the conch is hanging on to—and escapes, leaving the conch with an arm appetizer instead of a starfish supper.

Amazing! But that's not all. The starfish does not have to live out the rest of its life with only four arms. It grows another one! Isn't that cool?

There are a few animals that can

grow back a broken body part. A crab can grow a new claw. Some lizards can grow a new tail. An insect can grow a new leg. Have you ever been digging in the garden and accidentally cut an earthworm in half? You don't have to feel bad; it will grow another tail.

Growing back a lost part of the body is called regeneration. Scientists are hoping that someday they will be able to help people grow a new finger or toe. But humans can't regenerate body parts yet, so it's a real good idea to try to keep the ones you've got.

Regenerate also means to revive spiritually. Fortunately, humans are able to do that. Everybody has bad days when everything goes wrong. Our spirits get low. Our feelings get hurt. Sometimes all we need is a good night's sleep or a hug from someone who loves us.

Other times a hug isn't enough. Our spirits need regeneration. Jesus is our only hope.

The best plan is to take time for regeneration every day. You need to spend time with Jesus. He can restore your soul.

You can pray—it helps calm you down, it helps you start to think straight. When you pray, Jesus can give you ideas. He can help you think of ways to solve your problems.

You can learn more about Jesus. Your mom or dad can read you stories. If you know how to read, the Bible is the best book there is for regeneration.

You can help others. The best way to stop feeling sorry for yourself is to stop thinking about yourself all the time.

Jesus made the starfish so it can make itself whole again. Jesus can help you regenerate so that you can be whole each day, too.

Memorizing Bible texts is a real good idea. That way you can regenerate no matter where you are by remembering a text. One of the most regenerating texts is Psalm 23. See if you can memorize it this week. If you already know it, try saying it to yourself every day to refresh your memory and your soul.