

FATHER, SON, AND MAMMON

by William C. Martin

The path of the true believer has always been rocky, but members of the Worldwide Church of God struggle with remarkable obstacles: an aging, unpredictable patriarch, his rebellious and fun-loving son, and a shadowy adviser who now seems close to total control of the church and its assets.

On January 3, 1979, at 9:00 o'clock in the morning, the Government of God went into receivership. In yet another conflict between Christ and California, state agents seized fiscal control of the Worldwide Church of God and its affiliate institutions, Ambassador College and the Ambassador International Cultural Foundation, charging the church's eighty-seven-year-old founder, pastor, and "Only Apostle for Our Time," Herbert W. Armstrong, and his beloved disciple, Stanley R. Rader, with misappropriating church funds. The state alleged that Armstrong and Rader, with help from trusted acolytes, had bled the Body of Christ for millions of dollars, which they had spent on astronomical salaries, luxury houses and cars, year-round first-class travel, and extravagant gifts to foreign dignitaries.

The Worldwide Church of God (WCG) is perhaps the most remarkable of the hundreds of small sects that nestle in the crannies of American religion. Despite its modest size—30,000 to 100,000 adult members, depending on whose figures one accepts—it is not only the largest group under virtually total control of a single individual, but it has used radio, television, and the printed word to spread its oddly cheerless version of the Christian gospel more widely, if not more effectively, than denominations many times its

size. For most of the past two decades, Herbert Armstrong's son, Garner Ted, has been the voice and public symbol of the WCG, broadcasting daily over as many as 380 radio and 75 television stations. When Ted asked people to address their requests and inquiries to Herbert W. Armstrong, uninitiated listeners took it as a gesture of respect for a retired old gentleman who had long ago turned over the reins to his vigorous and talented son. But neither Garner Ted nor the members of the highly selective, tightly knit WCG ever doubted for a moment that it was "Mr. Armstrong" (as distinguished from "Mr. Ted Armstrong") who was in absolute control of "the Work" and who would remain in control until Christ came again to usher in the Wonderful World Tomorrow.

Though reared in a Quaker home in Iowa, Herbert Armstrong had little patience with a religion that called on him to respond quietly to an inner light. By his own account, he was cocky, conceited ("yet sincere"), and determined to become famous. He dropped out of high school at the end of the tenth grade and began a career in advertising and sales that lasted sixteen years, marked by oscillations of failure and success that taught him both how to be abased and how to abound. He eventually drifted to Salem, Oregon, where he fell in with, and began to preach for, the Church of God, Seventh Day, which kept not only the Saturday sabbath, but other Jewish holidays as well. In 1933, after his fractious spirit and belligerent manner had antagonized other ministers, Armstrong began an independent church in Eugene, with a charter membership of some twenty people. A few months later, on the first Sunday in the new year, the congregation staked its pastor to half an hour on station KORE in Eugene, and the Radio Church of God began the broadcasts that have been on the air forty-six years.

As listeners accepted the offer of a free subscription to a mimeographed publication called *Plain Truth*, contributed to the support of the broadcasts, and even joined his church, Armstrong bought time on more stations. By the end of World War II, he was commuting to Los Angeles to transcribe broadcasts for multiple distribution. In 1946, he transferred his operation to Pasadena, where he bought the first in a series of luxurious mansions and founded Ambassador College, an institution "based on God's revealed knowledge" and designed to train ministers for believers who acknowledged Armstrong as their spiritual leader.

The message Herbert Armstrong preached was a curious blend of traditional fundamentalism and eccentric interpretation of biblical prophecy, built on the belief that the true Israelites are not the Jews but the Anglo-Saxons, who are descended from

the ten lost tribes of Israel and are therefore the rightful heirs to the land and riches God originally promised to the offspring of Abraham. He touted this dogma as the "Master Key" that unlocked the scriptures and enabled him to proclaim "advance news." He also claimed to be the first man since Christ to have understood and taught it. In fact, "British Israelism" was an old chestnut in fundamentalist circles and had been convincingly discredited on historical, exegetical, and linguistic grounds. Moreover, Armstrong must have been aware that his teaching was unoriginal, and quite clearly borrowed from his theological forebears.

From the beginning, Herbert Armstrong laid a heavy yoke on his followers. If they became ill, they could pray, but could not take medicine or seek relief from a doctor. If they had been divorced prior to joining the church, they could never remarry; if they had already remarried, they were forced to separate and urged to move at least one state away from each other to minimize the temptation to reunite. And even if they were disease-free and once- or never-married, they still felt the burden of a closely monitored tithing policy that required them to contribute as much as 30 percent of their gross income and constantly badgered them to give even more toward the support of church programs.

Armstrong's unwillingness to brook opposition led to a rigid philosophy, still in force, of "government from the top down." Herbert Armstrong declares that the human institution most closely resembling the "Government of God" is the military, in which each rank gives unquestioning obedience to the rank above it. Church members are told that disrespect for a minister is disrespect for God, that doubting is of the devil ("If you doubt, you're damned"), and that any questioning of "the Work" will be punished by God as blasphemy. Dissenters and other rule-breakers are "disfellowshipped and marked," an excommunication process that involves explicit naming of the sin and total shunning of the sinner. The result, in one ex-member's words, is "a spiritual concentration camp" in which total submission is demanded and given.

Despite what must be considered formidable obstacles to recruitment, and a selection process that winnowed out all but the truest of believers, the Radio Church of God grew at the rate of about 30 percent a year. In the mid-fifties, as Armstrong approached normal retirement age, he showed signs of preparing for a graceful transfer of power. His oldest son, Richard, had been ordained to the ministry in 1952 and seemed a likely heir, but he died in a tragic car accident in

1958. Garner Ted had spent four years in the Navy rather than attend Ambassador College after high school, but when he got out he decided that "Dad's religion" was really God's religion and he enrolled as a freshman at the "West Point of God's Work," a cadet in training for the army of the Lord. With his retentive mind, facile tongue, and marvelous voice, Ted quickly became an able preacher. He began to make guest appearances on his father's program in 1955, and by 1959 he had assumed all broadcasting responsibilities on the program, now known as "The World Tomorrow."

The Pasadena campus expanded to twelve square blocks of converted mansions and opulent new buildings, a second college was opened in Bricket Wood, England, in 1959, and a third opened in Big Sandy, Texas, in 1964. By the beginning of the seventies, the Worldwide Church of God, as it was now named, was using 50 million watts of broadcasting power a week, *Plain Truth's* circulation had topped 2 million, and the Armstrong empire was taking in \$50 million a year, mostly from the 50,000 or so tithe-paying members scattered in 200 churches throughout the world. Herbert Armstrong, who had assumed the title of Apostle, was spending most of his time on globe-circling visits to world capitals, where he apparently enjoyed the respect and friendship of kings, princes, and other high-ranking representatives of the principalities and powers.

For years, the Armstrongs had told their followers that the apocalypse would arrive in January 1972. While Satan visited war and pestilence on most of the world, God's people would take refuge in the Palestinian city of Petra, a divinely ordained "place of safety." Jesus would return, give Satan his cosmic comeuppance, and transform the earth into a kind of urbanized Eden. This done, the faithful would emerge from hiding, be admitted to god status, and reign over the renewed planet. By making the mistake of setting a date for the return of a Christ who keeps on not coming, the Armstrongs exposed themselves to doubts about their infallibility, especially in the minds of members who had eschewed insurance, pensions, and home-purchases in the belief that long-term financial planning was superfluous and that all extra money should go toward preaching the gospel.

As suspicion grew that Armstrong was wearing the emperor's clothes, word spread that the emperor's son had been taking his off in unauthorized settings. Garner Ted, it was rumored, had succumbed to one of the more popular sins of the flesh. Herbert Armstrong permitted his married followers "the ecstasy of occasional coitus," as long as they stuck to "the most natural and commonly used positions," but made it quite clear that neither position was to be attempted outside

the home. When shocked ministers came to the Apostle in the fall of 1971 with evidence of Garner Ted's adulterous behavior, the father announced his son would take a well-deserved leave of absence to rest his frayed nerves. Though no other minister in the history of the organization had been reinstated after dismissal for sexual violation, Ted was back on the air in a matter of months and in 1973 was designated by Mr. Armstrong as his divinely appointed successor. According to Albert Portune, a former top-ranking evangelist and administrator, Armstrong rationalized that "Ted is divinely called" and "above the scripture." This hypocrisy, together with increasing opposition to the more onerous church doctrines, a growing awareness that the Armstrongs and certain favored personnel in the organization enjoyed a remarkably luxurious standard of living, and reports that the financial affairs of the church and the college were often conducted in an irresponsible manner, led thirty-five ministers and thousands of members to leave the church.

In the face of this revolt, Herbert Armstrong began to lighten the burden his people bore. Prior marital mistakes were forgiven at baptism, tithing obligations were relaxed somewhat, and the use of physicians and scientific medicine was approved. Even Garner Ted's harshest critics concede he pushed his father to make these more humane decisions, and those able to forgive him his trespasses looked forward to a healthier, less sectarian atmosphere under his leadership. But Herbert Armstrong, now well into his eighties, had not yet dropped his mantle; he had simply shifted his hold to get a better grip. And it was becoming increasingly clear that, when it did drop, Ted's right to it would not go unchallenged. In the light of the younger Armstrong's vulnerability to attack on his rectitude, several veteran ministers appeared to have an outside chance to assume the top post in the WCG when Mr. Armstrong died. Ultimately, however, the man who appeared in position to assume control of the WCG was not an Armstrong, not a minister, and not even, until 1975, a member of the church.

When I began reading Armstrong publications several years ago, I noticed that in almost every picture of the Apostle, he was flanked by an *éminence grise* in dark glasses who in no way resembled the severe, conservative men I had met at Ambassador College or at WCG services. He looked not just properous but overslick, like an executive in a profit-making corporation not registered with the state. No one seemed to know much about Stanley Rader, except that he was Herbert Armstrong's legal counsel and constant companion, had never been baptized, and bore watching.

Reared a Jew in White Plains, New York, Rader attended UCLA and USC Law School, where in 1963 he finished first in his class. Also a CPA, he had done accounting work for Ambassador College since 1958, and Herbert Armstrong had begun to seek his legal advice as well. When Mrs. Armstrong died in 1967, Rader became the Apostle's closest confidant, accompanying the older man on the trips that occupied at least two thirds of every year. After Rader's baptism in 1975, in a bathtub in Hong Kong's Mandarin Hotel, Herbert Armstrong began to speak of him as "my beloved son, in whom I am well pleased."

Rader's apparent conversion did not end all suspicion that his devotion was to mammon rather than to God. Perhaps sensing that his ecclesiastical future was limited, he and Robert Kuhn, a young colleague, convinced Herbert Armstrong that the best way to gain respectability and facilitate his mission to world leaders would be to establish a foundation that could sponsor a wide range of educational, cultural, and humanitarian projects. Such a foundation could also provide the opportunity to use Ambassador Auditorium, an architectural jewel known to church members as the House of God.

Armstrong, who admitted he had often been embarrassed at having to identify himself as a representative of a little-known church or college, embraced the plan with enthusiasm. Soon, the Ambassador International Cultural Foundation (AICF) hosted a benefit concert by Artur Schnabel and announced a glittering 1975-1976 season of sixty-six concerts that would include performances by Maria Callas, Joan Sutherland, Marilyn Horne, Luciano Pavarotti, Yehudi Menuhin, and two appearances by Vladimir Horowitz. In 1977, the foundation began to publish *Quest* magazine, and in 1978 it opened Everest House, a secular book publishing firm. AICF publications listed Herbert W. Armstrong as founder and chairman, and Garner Ted Armstrong as president, but insiders recognized that Executive Vice Presidents Rader and Kuhn shaped and controlled the foundation, while Ted devoted his energies to the church and the college.

What almost no one, including Garner Ted, recognized was that, should the church cease to exist, its assets, now worth an estimated \$80 million, could be transferred into a non-profit foundation matching AICF's description. Such a transfer was made possible by a 1968 amendment to the church's Articles of Incorporation. According to the document, signed by Herbert W. Armstrong and Albert Portune, then secretary of the WCG, the board of directors and 5051 members of the church met at 363 Grove Street in Pasadena and voted in favor of the amendment in question. But Herbert Armstrong has never permitted vot-

ing on any matter pertaining to the church, the building at 363 Grove Street will hold no more than 400 people, and Portune, in a television interview, declared that no such meeting occurred. When I asked Rader about the document, he explained that "it was probably a sabbath and each minister in the area read the proposed amendment to the members at the service that day, and since there was no voice of dissent, they were recorded as affirmative votes." Reference to a foundation, he said, was just "legal boilerplate." That may have been the case when the document was written, but when I have shown it to present and former church members, they have grasped its implications immediately. I am confident they have not been entirely lost on Stanley Rader.

Despite, or perhaps because of, the substantial sums going into AICF—*Quest* and Everest House lost \$3,900,000 in 1978—the WCG developed fiscal hyperextension. In 1975, the Bricket Wood campus was closed and sold; then, in 1977, Big Sandy was closed and its students and faculty shifted to Pasadena, a move estimated to have cost \$4 million. The façade of utopian contentment was shattered by the appearance of *Ambassador Review* and *Ambassador Report*, magazine-length publications produced by former students and crammed with charges of mail censorship and other invasions of student and employee privacy, suppression of dissent, absence of academic freedom, and falsification of credentials by a professor; a coed's account of seduction by Garner Ted; an analysis of the school's repeated failure to obtain accreditation; and a list of sources of help for people who sought to escape or find relief from what the publications called "the Armstrong Cult."

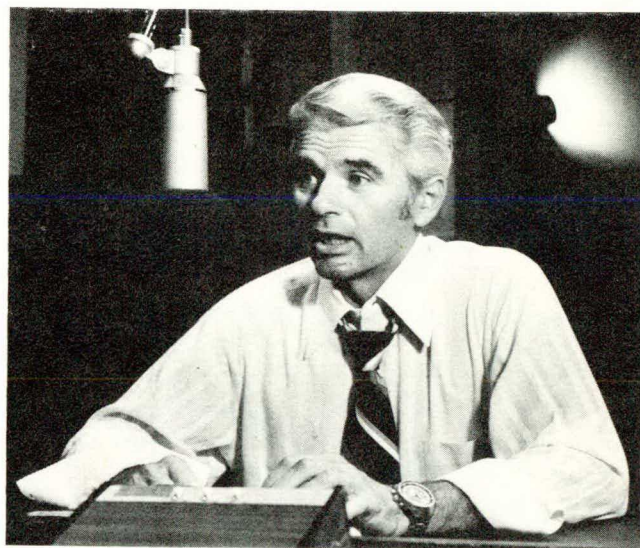
These problems notwithstanding, the hierarchy of the Armstrong empire seemed fairly stable at the beginning of 1978. Herbert Armstrong was still at the top, but had moved to Tucson with his new bride, a forty-year-old woman (Stanley Rader's secretary prior to her betrothal), and had turned control of day-to-day operations over to Garner Ted. Rader announced he would continue to hold his post in AICF and to serve as Mr. Armstrong's personal adviser, but that he would no longer be an officer in either the church or the college. The problem of succession, it appeared, had been solved. Rader would be well rewarded for his services and would continue to reap the benefits of world travel as long as Mr. Armstrong lived, but GTA, as he is often called, would assume full control when his father died.

Ted's ascendancy was brief. In late spring, while he was in Texas preparing to reopen the Big Sandy campus, always his favorite of the schools, Rader tossed a grenade under his training throne. In a single devastating announcement, he revealed that Ambassador Col-

lege would be cut back to a short-course school for ministers, Ted's television program would be canceled, and Ted would be removed from his position as head and board member of the church and the college. AICF, however, would expand its activities. Rader piously insisted that he and the two Armstrongs had never enjoyed greater unity, but this thin fraternal façade crumbled a few weeks later when Herbert Armstrong, who had compared their relationship to that of the heavenly Father and Son, disfellowshipped and marked his only living son, charging him with disloyalty and disobedience and apologizing to the brethren for having been "a respecter of persons" when he had covered up for the scoundrel in the past.

Shortly afterward, Rader sent Ted an offer of \$50,000 annual retirement pay and use of the church's cabin at Lake Tahoe in return for Ted's pledge never to divulge any confidential information he might have about the church, the college, the foundation, or any of the people connected with them. Rader said he hoped the conditions would be accepted "in the attitude of love and concern in which they are offered," and signed the letter, "In Jesus' name." Ted declined not only Rader's offer but several attractive possibilities in the secular media, including one that would have paid him \$750,000 over three years. Instead, he quickly formed the Church of God, International (CGI) with headquarters in Tyler, Texas, and was back on the air within weeks, preaching on a network that grew to twenty stations within six months. To make it clear that Garner Ted was not speaking for the WCG, the elder Armstrong returned to the air, or seemed to do so; in fact, most of his broadcasts were produced from recordings made during the fifties, and response to them has been markedly poorer than when Ted was the speaker.

At the end of 1978, Herbert Armstrong was tucked away in Tucson, recovering from a heart attack, Ted was in Texas, and Stanley Rader was in Ted's old Pasadena office. His title was treasurer and he denied aspiring to an official post in the church, but his closeness to Mr. Armstrong gave him power that seemed unlimited, and he moved on several fronts to solidify his position. Most issues of the *Worldwide News*, a newspaper sent to all members of the church, contained a lengthy section called "Forum with Stanley Rader," in which he answered questions that might be on church members' minds. In the pastor's report received by ministers, Herbert Armstrong's pronouncements were followed by remarks from Rader, ahead of communications from C. Wayne Cole, the director of pastoral administration. When Herbert Armstrong made personal appearances at church gatherings, Stanley Rader took the podium immediately afterward. When the Worldwide Church of God spoke



Left: Church founder Herbert W. Armstrong; top right: Stanley Rader at the podium; bottom right: Garner Ted Armstrong on the air.

to the media, it spoke through Stanley Rader. And, perhaps most telling of all, those whose loyalty to Rader was known to be weak seemed to be either put out of the church or shunted into positions where they could do no harm. Rader has compared himself to Richelieu. Some former WCG members regard him as more like Rasputin.

Six individuals, all WCG members in good standing, approached the California attorney general in mid-1978 with documents they believed supported their charges that the church regularly violated its own by-laws by denying its members any role in decision-making processes; that Armstrong and Rader were diverting millions of dollars in church funds to their own personal benefit; that the financial affairs of the three organizations were in serious disarray; and that church properties were being liquidated at an alarming rate. On January 2, California Superior Judge Jerry Pacht issued an order that named retired

Judge Steven Weisman temporary receiver of the three Armstrong organizations and directed him to seize control without prior notice.

In retrospect, the grounds on which Pacht made his decision seem shaky. The state has not been able to produce proof of sweeping liquidation of properties; it can no more force the WCG to become a democratic organization than it can demand that the pope rule by plebiscite; and the charges of misuse of funds were based on documents drawn from the church's own records of transactions that, though perhaps unknown to the membership, were not under-the-table affairs. Some observers feel that, with the events of Jonestown still fresh in their minds, the attorney general and Judge Pacht sought to avoid another California-based religious scandal and were more receptive than usual to charges of malfeasance by church leaders. Subsequent events, however, seemed to justify at least some suspicions. When the receiver's forces descended on the campus, they met hostility and resistance. Preliminary hearings revealed that efforts had been made to remove

record books from Rader's office, documents had been shredded, and the computerized membership list had been scrambled to prevent Weisman's access to it; college employees testified they had seen staff members entering the data-processing building in violation of the receiver's directions and hurrying from the campus with record books. As the conflict mounted, approximately 2500 church members blocked Weisman's entry to campus buildings for three days, forcing him to agree to move his office to an off-campus location.

Weisman resigned shortly afterward, claiming the situation was placing him under undue stress. Judge Julius Title, who assumed jurisdiction of the case shortly after Pacht's order, ruled that independent auditors working with the church's cooperation could gather the information the attorney general needed. Rader appeared ready to cooperate, then declared the church would fight any investigation of its finances, on grounds that its civil rights were being violated. Title responded by naming a second receiver; Rader accused him of trying to punish the church; and WCG faithful staged another sit-in protest. When Title agreed to hold off the receiver temporarily if the church would produce a \$1 million bond, church members, contacted through a nationwide telephone network (one cynical ex-minister says the organization should be renamed the Telephone Church of God), pledged well over \$2 million in property, jewelry, and cars. Despite this outpouring of support, church officials reported that income had dropped so precipitously that expenses were exceeding income by approximately \$700,000 a week, and they pleaded their case in a full-page ad in the *L.A. Times*, proclaiming they had "nothing to hide—but much to protect." Rader and an impressive cadre of lawyers also promised to press the case all the way to the Supreme Court if that should prove necessary.

In a series of hearings on the receivership and related matters, the state focused on the issue of whether Armstrong, Rader, and several key associates had garnered somewhat more than their share of grapes from the Lord's vineyard. Rader, for example, owned three homes simultaneously, all financed initially by the church. In 1978, he pocketed \$1 million in personal profit from the sale of the houses. In addition, he receives approximately \$200,000 a year in salary from the church, plus an unlimited expense account and first-class accommodations on all his travels. His contract, which guarantees him a minimum of \$100,000 a year for part-time consultant service even after Mr. Armstrong dies, runs until July 2003. The Apostle, Rader says, believes that "a servant is worthy of his hire."

Other church records reveal that millions have been spent on travel, lodging and food, and public relations,

including expensive meals and lavish gifts for foreign dignitaries. Rader is quite candid about these expenditures. He notes, correctly, that the church was well aware of Mr. Armstrong's travels and that *Plain Truth* and other publications have frequently contained pictures of the Apostle entertaining or presenting gifts of Steuben glass to such notables as King Leopold of Belgium, Golda Meir, Indira Gandhi, King Hussein, Anwar Sadat, Menachem Begin, Princess Grace, and Jomo Kenyatta. The trips were expensive because Mr. Armstrong took along a full support staff. "Some people might not agree that this is the way to spread the gospel," he concedes, "but we feel it is."

In fact, Mr. Armstrong's travels do not appear to have reaped much of a harvest. Rather, he seems to be playing a kind of religious tag; if he has his picture taken with a nation's leader, he somehow imagines he has preached the gospel to yet another land of lost and dying sinners. Garner Ted is particularly skeptical about the efficacy of this aspect of his father's apostolate. "Never in the history of human endeavor," he says, "has so much money been spent by so few for so little. Those trips are just glorified autograph-hunting tours—window-dressing, like AICF and *Quest*. My father has gone on and on about the great good these trips were doing, but it might come down to a thousand dollars a word for some lecture on the 'Seven Laws of Success' to the Civitan Club of New Delhi or the Rotarians of Nairobi. Dad has boasted about how he does not mention the name of Jesus Christ on these visits. If that is the case, why bother?"

Though Armstrong's gifts have undoubtedly won him friends in high places, the nature and closeness of some of the relationships are overdrawn. In a May 21, 1978, letter to members and "co-workers" (non-member contributors) he wrote that he was scheduled to "co-host an important premiere of a charity motion picture to raise funds for the handicapped children in Britain. Queen Elizabeth II has promised to co-host this premiere and banquet—and in the event she is unable to be present, either Prince Charles (the next King) or Prince Philip will be there." An inquiry to Buckingham Palace drew a blunt response: "There is no truth whatever in Mr. Armstrong's claims to be associated with the Queen, Prince Philip, or indeed any other member of the Royal Family in sponsoring a project in this country."

Despite such ludicrous misrepresentations, Rader is probably correct in claiming that those who accept Herbert Armstrong's apostleship will not be seriously troubled by news of what he spends. Further, since a high percentage of church members have attended or visited Ambassador College, it is no secret that Mr. Armstrong and other church officials live in luxury. On the contrary, members have been told that the good

life at God's Headquarters is but a foretaste of what the redeemed will enjoy when they enter into their own mansions of glory. And finally, people in poor or reduced circumstances often find pleasure in identifying with a leader who not only knows kings and princes but lives like them.

Herbert Armstrong and Stanley Rader characterize the state's effort to impose the receivership as Satan's "master blow to destroy God's church" and the lawsuit as the culmination of a conspiracy involving disaffected church members, venal attorneys, power-hungry ministers, and, of course, Garner Ted Armstrong. I asked Rader for his assessment of those who seek to oust him. Dissenters within the ministry, he said, are "political animals. As they manifest their ugly heads, Mr. Armstrong for forty-six years has chopped them off. They constantly lose. They are going into a lake of fire. They are dead letters. We don't worry about them anymore." He described the lay members who initiated the lawsuit as "rebellious, carnal-minded pawns" who hope to see Garner Ted Armstrong returned to power. "They are takers, not givers. They try to make the organization conform to their ideas of what it should be like, so that they can satisfy their own desires."

The plaintiffs do feel the future of the church lies with Ted Armstrong, but my visits with them did not confirm Rader's characterization. John Tuit, who initiated the suit, gave the WCG over \$3800 from his savings in 1976, though his troubled business brought in only \$4500. And Earl Timmons, who has become the most aggravating thorn in the church's side, is neither a taker nor a pawn. At forty-six, Timmons is tall, thin, and leathery, with western work clothes and a laconic manner that contrast sharply with Stanley Rader's designer fashions and glibness. Neither he nor his wife, Shirley, graduated from high school, but they managed to build a successful plumbing company which they sold in 1977 for enough money to allow them to devote all their time to the case.

The Timmonses have given the Worldwide Church of God thousands of dollars in cash and free labor, but they never pledged away their minds. They took what seemed to make sense and ignored what did not. Timmons explained that he "never went along with some of the doctrines, like not going to a doctor if you are sick. I believe, just like the Bible says, that 'God helps those who help themselves.'" They accepted the church's decision that they should not adopt a child, but they secretly sponsored twelve Cambodian refugees despite Armstrong's teaching against trying to relieve the physical sufferings of the unsaved. Though they have become disillusioned with the church, they profess lit-

tle regret for the sacrifices they have made to the Work. "We always said," Shirley recalled, "that when the end push came, we would sell everything we had and give it to preach the gospel." Earl added quietly, "We still mean it. If they were really preaching the gospel, I would give it all, but Mr. Armstrong is not following Christ anymore. He asks widows to send two dollars. It takes a lot of two-dollars to pay for an \$800 meal at Perino's. I just can't go along with that. Too many people in the church are like that Jim Jones bunch was. Whatever they are told, they believe, regardless of what it is."

Robert Gerringer, one of the publishers of *Ambassador Report*, does not regard the comparison as absurd. "I have been out of the church for five years," he said, "and it was sobering as hell to hear about that Guyana stuff. Back in the sixties, we really wanted to go to Petra, the 'place of safety.' I came to Ambassador College so I could get out of the world completely and lock arms with a small, tightly knit group of believers. If Herbert or Ted Armstrong had said, 'Hey, let's go to our East Guyana ranch,' I would have been the first to go. And who knows what would have happened once we had gotten there, isolated and shut off from everyone else?"

Former Director of Pastoral Administration Wayne Cole, who was disfellowshipped for cooperating with Judge Weisman and his assistants, acknowledges discomfort at the direction the church has taken. "A number of people in the ministry of this church are the kind," he said, recalling an Old Testament story, "that, in the right circumstances, could go in and kill the Amalekites, man, woman, and child. They are the kind of people who could have gotten sadistic pleasure out of impaling babies, if they believed that was God's will. I believe it is possible people could be in danger. It frightens me that a man can get control of the minds of individuals to the point that a cult is able to. And frankly, I see us as having been very cultish."

Leona McNair, whose former husband is one of the two top-ranking ministers in the church, believes the Apostle's bluff could have been called by men of character. "He struck terror into a lot of people's minds with his temper," she recalled, "but if you confront Herbert Armstrong directly and let him roar at you, and then put some questions to him, keeping your control, he is totally deflated. But I suppose I could count on half a hand the men who have ever stood up to him. When I came to see how spineless the ministers in that church were, the disappointment was terrible."

Though my sample was neither large nor scientifically selected, my conversations with a dozen or so present and former ministers of the WCG confirm the picture of them as thoroughly compromised men. One, who came to my hotel room late at night to avoid being

seen in my company, said of himself and his colleagues, "We have lost our health, our wealth, our self-respect, our courage, our manhood. Armstrong didn't think it all out and say, 'These are the moves I'll make and these are the stops I'll pull,' but one thing has led to another and this is the result."

By surrendering their autonomy so completely, these men and women have not only vandalized the image of God in themselves but have almost certainly diminished their capacity to cope effectively with the inevitable loss of their leader. For a time, as his health allows, Herbert W. Armstrong may continue his gospel junkets, passing out glass and picking up stars for his millennial crown, but if the universal experience of the human race can be taken as a reliable guideline, he is eventually going to die.

The scenario beyond that point is difficult to plot with confidence. Both sides in the lawsuit have continued to develop their cases, complete with a rash of related suits and countersuits, but expectations of either dramatic new revelations by the plaintiffs or decisive refutation by the WCG have diminished, and few believe the case will result in sweeping change within the church or its affiliate organizations. Stanley Rader has been ordained as an evangelist and most key positions in the church's hierarchy are held by men loyal to him, but he has neither the qualities nor the allegiance of the members requisite to become spiritual head of the Work, even if Herbert Armstrong were to anoint him as his successor, and that seems an unlikely prospect. On January 2, 1979, Armstrong, apparently grown wary of Rader's ambition, directed him to resign his positions in both the church and the college. Less than twenty-four hours later, the receiver's arrival at Ambassador College not only stayed Rader's descent but bound him even closer to his benefactor. Still, Mr. Armstrong has probably not repudiated his candid admission that "neither the ministry nor the lay members will accept [Rader] as a spiritual leader." A more plausible option for Rader may be to shift as many church and college assets as possible to the AICF, which he could then control with limited interference from his brethren.

Garner Ted Armstrong may swoop in from Texas to lead the parade to paradise, but lingering doubts about his moral fitness, driven deeper by the calumny his father has heaped on him, would make him unacceptable to many ministers and laymen. Despite the appeal that \$80 million in assets may have, Ted professes delight at being out from under the "spirit of tyranny" that pervades the organization. His own contribution to the repressive climate in the WCG is too well documented to deny, but he vows, "I will never again be part of an autocracy. My dad put me through absolute personal hell. Every time my body quivered, he rolled a

truck back and forth over it. But I see now that he did me a great favor. I thank God that I am finally out of all that mess." Ted's supporters believe he is sincere, but they are taking few chances. When he presented the CGI's August 1979 ministerial conference with a draft of a constitution that would make him chairman of the board in perpetuity, resistance was so strong that the board appointed a committee to revise the constitution and Armstrong announced his willingness to be excluded from the chairmanship if that seemed desirable.

The apparent desire to avoid his father's most obvious mistakes has won Garner Ted the loyalty and support of a clutch of the most able leaders who have left the WCG. With their help, the CGI has grown to over seventy congregations, Garner Ted's radio program is being heard on almost fifty stations, and he returned to television in January of this year.

In Robert Gerringer's favorite version, neither Stanley Rader nor Garner Ted Armstrong would be successful and their churches would simply dwindle and disappear. "If the Worldwide Church of God and all its ministers disappeared off the face of the earth," he said, "I don't think its 60,000 members would be the worse for it. Some percentage might go through a trauma of readjustment, but most of the people I know who have left—my wife, my wife's family, our friends—have just gone back and become normal people. They didn't start taking dope or flipping off bridges. Few of them attend any church of any kind and I think they all have a healthy skepticism for anyone who says he has all the answers. They are just good Christians and good neighbors, with integrity and honesty. I think most of the people could make it on their own."

What does Herbert Armstrong want? A year ago, he told Wayne Cole he wanted to appoint a board of directors that would take control after his death, working as an administrative team until a clear leader emerged. Though susceptible of deteriorating into a power struggle, this approach would probably have the best chance of accomplishing, in a more or less orderly fashion, what Max Weber called "the routinization of charisma." In fact, however, the elder Armstrong has moved in precisely the opposite direction, restructuring the ministry to transform what was once an elaborate hierarchy into a system in which each local minister is answerable directly to, and only to, Herbert W. Armstrong, Pastor General. As has been his custom for almost half a century, he legitimates the arrangement by proclaiming it to be the purest form of the Government of God. Those who continue to regard Mr. Armstrong as God's Only Apostle for Our Time will accept his claim and follow him to the end. But when the end comes, as it must, the WCG is certain to experience devastating trauma. □

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