

THE DEPTHS OF **SATAN**

*How Wolves Devoured
the Worldwide Church of God
& Why It Was Nothing New*



MICHAEL H. EXTON

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How Wolves Devoured the Worldwide Church of God &
Why It Was Nothing New

by Michael H. Exton

– Acts 20:29 (NKJV) –

*“For I know this, that after my departure **savage wolves** will come in among you, not sparing the flock.”*

– Revelation 2:24-24 (NLT) –

*“But I also have a message for the rest of you in Thyatira who have not followed their false teaching (‘deeper truths,’ as they call them — **depths of Satan**, actually). I will ask nothing more of you except that you hold tightly to what you have until I come.”*

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***The Depths of Satan: How Wolves Devoured the Worldwide
Church of God and Why It Was Nothing New***

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Published by Michael H. Exton

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*To the small flock — in every generation, in every century — that
held fast to the truth when the wolves came in to devour the sheep.*

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INTRODUCTION

Why This Book Needed to Be Written

Most of the witnesses are dead or aging.

The ministers who lived through it have their own agendas and their own versions of events. Some of them were complicit. Some of them were cowards. Some of them waited until the money was safe and the risk was gone before they finally made their move. And every single one of them has a story that conveniently places himself on the right side of history.

The members who stayed are scattered across dozens of splinter groups, each claiming to be the true remnant, each pointing fingers at the others, each convinced that its leader — and only its leader — carries the torch that Herbert W. Armstrong lit. They can't all be right.

And the organization itself? It doesn't even exist anymore. Not really. It was renamed Grace Communion International, reinvented from the ground up, and absorbed into mainstream Protestantism as if nothing ever happened. As if 145,000 people hadn't built their entire lives around a set of beliefs that were quietly thrown in the trash. As if decades of sacrifice — three tithes, no Christmas, no Easter, no birthdays, Sabbath every Saturday, holy days every year, moves across the country, children pulled out of school activities, marriages strained, careers adjusted — as if all of that was just a phase. An embarrassment. A mistake to be corrected.

But something did happen. Something diabolical.

The Worldwide Church of God — an organization that at its peak had 145,000 members, 800 congregations in 100 countries, a weekly television broadcast reaching millions, and a monthly magazine

with a circulation of over 8 million copies in seven languages — was systematically dismantled from within by men who had pledged to protect it.

Not from the outside. From the inside.

Not by enemies. By shepherds.

Or rather, by men who dressed like shepherds but moved like wolves.

• • •

I was there. I saw it happen.

And unlike most of the people sitting in those pews, I saw through it in real time — not after the damage was done, not after the history books were written, not after the splinter groups formed and the finger-pointing began, but *while the con was still being run*.

In November 1988, I put two documents side by side on my kitchen table. The first was an article Joseph W. Tkach had published in the *Worldwide News* on June 22, 1987, in which he swore — in black and white, for all the membership to read — that the church would *never* change the makeup doctrine. The second was an article Tkach published on November 14, 1988, in which he changed the makeup doctrine completely and contradicted himself over and over again.

Two articles. Same author. Same publication. One said “never.” The other said “now.”

That was all it took. I didn’t need a theology degree. I didn’t need a committee. I didn’t need a minister to explain it to me. I could read. And when a man tells you “never” and then does it anyway, you are not dealing with a man of God. You are dealing with a con artist.

I knew this because I had been watching con artists my entire life. My stepfather was a professional con man. I grew up in his house. I watched a master deceiver operate from the time I was a small boy. I learned to read the signs, the patterns, the language, the timing. I learned how a con works — how the mark is set up, how the trust is built, how the switch is made, and how the con man always has an explanation ready when someone starts asking questions.

And when I saw those same patterns and that same language coming from the pulpit in Pasadena, I knew exactly what I was looking at.

• • •

I started telling people in November 1988. Four years before the Global Church of God was founded, I told anyone who would listen that the church was going to split and that Roderick C. Meredith would probably be the one to lead the faithful. I named names — Meredith, McNair, Apartian, Neff, Ames, Waterhouse, and others — and said they would eventually leave. Every single one of them did.

When people asked me why I didn't include Herman Hoeh on that list, I told them I didn't think he would leave. He didn't. The architect stayed with his building, even after someone else gutted it. Hoeh remained with the organization through its transformation into Grace Communion International until his death in 2004.

In 1992, I published a booklet called *The Startling Prophecy of God's True Church!* that laid out what was happening and what was coming. I wrote an anonymous letter to Tkach himself, using his own words from the 1987 makeup article against his own words from the 1988 article. I let the con man convict himself with his own mouth.

Tkach was furious. He responded in his Personal column. He sent Joe Jr. and Michael Fezell to the Bay Area to find the “traitor.”

I became the first person from the San Francisco Bay Area to be removed from the Worldwide Church of God for exposing the truth.

I wear that as a badge of honor.

• • •

This book tells that story. Not the sanitized version. Not the version the splinter groups want you to hear. Not the version that makes everyone look good or lets the guilty off the hook. The truth.

It tells how the Worldwide Church of God was built, how it was infiltrated, how it was destroyed, and who did it. It tells what I saw, what I said, and what happened to me when I said it. It tells how the wolves came in — not through the back door, but through the pulpit — and devoured the flock while the flock sat there and let them do it.

And in the final chapter, it tells you something that most people in the Church of God have never fully understood: what happened to the Worldwide Church of God was not unique. It was not a one-time event. It was not an anomaly. It was the same pattern that has been repeating itself for two thousand years — the same pattern that began in the first century, the same pattern that Scripture itself warns about.

Revelation 2:24–25 (NLT): “But I also have a message for the rest of you in Thyatira who have not followed their false teaching (‘deeper truths,’ as they call them — depths of Satan, actually). I will ask nothing more of you except that you hold tightly to what you have until I come.”

“Deeper truths.” That is exactly what Tkach and his handlers called their changes. “New understanding.” “Deeper truths.” The very terminology Christ warned about in Revelation is the terminology they used to sell the destruction of God’s church.

The depths of Satan.

Same playbook. Same language. Same result. Every single time.

• • •

I am not a minister. I am not a theologian. I am not the head of a splinter group, and I am not interested in becoming one. I am a retired running coach from the San Francisco Bay Area who spent thirty-six years teaching kids how to run fast and who spent forty-seven years studying his Bible. I am a man who was raised by a con artist and who, because of that upbringing, was given a gift that most people in the Worldwide Church of God did not have: the ability to see a con while it was still in progress.

This book is my testimony. It is my witness. And it is my warning to anyone in any Church of God, anywhere in the world, who thinks it can’t happen again.

It can. It will. It always does.

The only question is whether you’ll see it coming.

CHAPTER 1

The Man Who Built It

On January 16, 1986, Herbert W. Armstrong died in his home in Pasadena, California. He was ninety-three years old.

Within a decade, everything he had spent fifty-two years building would be systematically dismantled by the very men he had trusted to protect it. His teachings would be repudiated. His college would be closed. His magazine would be gutted. His broadcast would be canceled. And the organization he had built from nothing into one of the most remarkable religious enterprises of the twentieth century would be renamed, reinvented, and absorbed into the mainstream Protestantism he had spent his entire ministry warning against.

But before we talk about how it was destroyed, you need to understand what was built. Because what Herbert W. Armstrong built was extraordinary. And you cannot fully appreciate the magnitude of what was taken unless you first grasp the magnitude of what existed.

• • •

Herbert W. Armstrong was born on July 31, 1892, in Des Moines, Iowa. He was not a theologian. He was not a seminary graduate. He was not raised in a religious family with generations of ministers behind him. He was an advertising man — a self-educated

businessman who made his living in print media and marketing before God got hold of him.

His road to the ministry began in 1926, when his wife Loma was challenged by a neighbor who kept the seventh-day Sabbath. Loma brought the question home to her husband: Was Saturday or Sunday the true day of worship? Armstrong, confident he could settle the matter quickly and prove Sunday was correct, dove into his Bible to do exactly that.

He couldn't do it. The more he studied, the more he realized that everything he had assumed about Christianity — everything the mainstream churches had taught him — was built on tradition, not Scripture. Sunday worship instead of the seventh-day Sabbath. Easter instead of Passover. Christmas instead of the Feast of Tabernacles. The trinity instead of God's true nature. The immortal soul instead of the resurrection. An ever-burning hell instead of the grave.

That was what made Armstrong different. He didn't inherit his beliefs from a denomination. He proved them. He challenged every assumption. He went to the Source. And what he found in that Source turned his world upside down.

Armstrong was ordained in 1931 by the Oregon Conference of the Church of God (Seventh Day), a small Sabbath-keeping denomination that traced its roots back through the centuries. But Armstrong's restless, prove-all-things mind soon put him at odds with the very people who had ordained him. He began teaching the annual holy days of Leviticus 23 — the Passover, the Days of Unleavened Bread, Pentecost, the Feast of Trumpets, the Day of Atonement, the Feast of Tabernacles, and the Last Great Day — festivals that the Church of God (Seventh Day) did not observe. He also embraced the doctrine of British Israelism, the belief that the

peoples of the United States and the British Commonwealth were descended from the lost tribes of Israel.

These teachings put him on a collision course with his own denomination. By 1937, the Oregon Conference revoked his credentials. Armstrong was on his own.

• • •

But Armstrong didn't see it as being on his own. He saw it as being set free.

In January 1934, from a tiny 100-watt radio station in Eugene, Oregon, Armstrong launched a weekly broadcast called *The World Tomorrow*. That same month, he published the first issue of a small, mimeographed magazine called *The Plain Truth*. The first print run was 250 copies. Two hundred and fifty. Typed on a borrowed mimeograph machine. Eight pages.

He called his ministry the Radio Church of God.

Nobody outside of the Willamette Valley knew who Herbert Armstrong was. He had no money, no institutional backing, no seminary degree, no denominational support. What he had was a message, a microphone, and a mimeograph machine.

And God.

That was enough.

• • •

What happened over the next five decades defied every natural expectation.

The radio broadcast grew. One station became two. Two became ten. Ten became dozens. By the 1940s, *The World Tomorrow* was

heard across the United States. Armstrong's voice — deep, authoritative, urgent — cut through the static of the AM dial and landed in living rooms from coast to coast. He didn't sound like a preacher. He sounded like a man who had found something and couldn't keep quiet about it.

In 1947, Armstrong moved his headquarters from Oregon to Pasadena, California, and founded Ambassador College. When the doors opened on October 8, 1947, there were exactly four students and eight faculty members. Those four students were Richard David Armstrong — HWA's eldest son, who would die in a car crash in 1958 at age twenty-nine; Herman L. Hoeh, from Santa Rosa, California; Raymond C. Cole, from Oregon, whose family came from the same Church of God congregation that Armstrong himself had come out of; and Betty Bates, from Tulsa, Oklahoma. Four students. That was the beginning. The campus would eventually become one of the most beautiful small college campuses in America, with manicured grounds, world-class architecture, and a concert auditorium that hosted performers from around the world. Ambassador wasn't just a school. It was a training ground for the ministry, a publishing hub, and the nerve center of a growing worldwide operation.

The growth never stopped. In the 1960s, *The World Tomorrow* made the leap from radio to television, and now Armstrong's message wasn't just heard — it was seen. By the 1980s, the television broadcast aired on 382 stations in the United States and 36 international outlets, making it one of the largest religious broadcasting operations in the world — dwarfing the reach of Jerry Falwell, Jimmy Swaggart, Oral Roberts, and Jim Bakker.

The Plain Truth grew right alongside it. That little eight-page mimeographed newsletter from 1934 became a full-color, professionally produced international magazine that looked and read

like *Time* or *Newsweek*. By 1986, it was published in seven languages — English, German, French, Spanish, Dutch, Italian, and Norwegian — and its monthly circulation had reached 8.2 million copies. To put that in perspective, *Time* magazine's circulation that same year was 5.9 million. The *Plain Truth* was bigger than *Time*. And every single copy was given away free, funded entirely by the tithes and offerings of church members.

The Worldwide Church of God — renamed from the Radio Church of God on January 5, 1968 — had grown into something that no one in that little Oregon radio station could have imagined. At its peak, the organization had approximately 145,000 baptized members in over 800 congregations spread across more than 100 countries. It operated three Ambassador College campuses — Pasadena, Big Sandy (Texas), and Bricket Wood (England). It employed thousands. It received over \$200 million a year in tithes and offerings. It maintained offices on multiple continents.

Armstrong himself had become an internationally recognized figure. He met personally with heads of state around the world — Anwar Sadat of Egypt, Menachem Begin of Israel, Margaret Thatcher of Great Britain, Ferdinand Marcos of the Philippines, King Hussein of Jordan, and every Prime Minister of Japan from 1971 onward. Emperor Hirohito honored him with Japan's Order of the Sacred Treasure, one of the highest awards that can be bestowed on a non-Japanese citizen. King Leopold III of Belgium presented him with a priceless watch originally commissioned to honor the greatest contributors to world peace. Ronald Reagan sent a personal tribute after Armstrong's death, acknowledging his contribution to sharing the Word of the Lord.

For a man who started with a 100-watt radio station and 250 mimeographed copies of a homemade magazine, the scope of what Armstrong built was staggering.

But the buildings and the broadcasts and the circulation numbers were never the point. The point was always the message.

Armstrong taught that mainstream Christianity had gone off the rails centuries ago — that the churches of this world were teaching a blend of biblical truth and pagan tradition, and that the vast majority of professing Christians were following customs and doctrines that came not from the Bible but from Rome. Sunday worship instead of the seventh-day Sabbath. Easter instead of Passover. Christmas instead of the Feast of Tabernacles. The trinity instead of God’s true nature. The immortal soul instead of the resurrection. An ever-burning hell instead of the grave.

Armstrong taught that God’s true church had always been small — a “little flock,” as Christ called it in Luke 12:32 — and that this little flock had been keeping the truth alive for nearly two thousand years while the great visible churches of this world followed a counterfeit gospel. He taught that the Worldwide Church of God was the continuation of that little flock, carrying forward the same truths that the original apostles had taught in the first century.

He taught British Israelism — the belief that the United States (descended from Joseph’s son Manasseh) and the British Commonwealth nations (descended from Joseph’s other son Ephraim) were the modern-day descendants of the lost tribes of Israel, and that understanding this identity was the key to unlocking the prophetic scriptures. He taught that God’s annual holy days — the seven festivals outlined in Leviticus 23 — were not “just for the Jews” but were God’s commanded observances for all of His people, and that each one revealed a step in God’s master plan for humanity.

He taught that the kingdom of God was not some ethereal spiritual concept but a literal, physical government that Jesus Christ would establish on this earth at His return. He taught that human beings were not yet “saved” but were in the process of being transformed — that salvation was not a one-time event but a lifelong journey of growth, overcoming, and obedience. And he taught that Christians were called not just to believe, but to *do* — to keep God’s commandments, to observe His Sabbath, to follow His laws, to live His way of life.

You didn’t have to agree with every word Herbert Armstrong ever said to recognize that the man was doing something no one else was doing: going directly to the Bible and teaching what it actually said, regardless of what two thousand years of tradition had layered on top of it.

But honesty demands a complete accounting. Not all of these teachings were original to Armstrong, and not all of them were correct. The Saturday Sabbath, the holy days, clean and unclean meats, soul sleep, the rejection of the trinity, and the basic framework of British Israelism — Armstrong inherited all of these from earlier Sabbath-keeping groups, including the Church of God (Seventh Day) and, further back, the Seventh-day Adventists. The Wednesday crucifixion came from the same tradition. Even the teaching that the Mark of the Beast was Sunday worship came from Ellen G. White and the Adventists — and Armstrong got that one wrong.

What was potentially original to Armstrong was something far more profound: the prophetic application of British Israelism as a warning to modern nations, the sequential meaning of the holy days as God’s master plan for humanity, the Second Resurrection teaching that gave every human being who ever lived a genuine opportunity for salvation, the God Family doctrine in its full form, and — perhaps

most important of all — the complete answer to why God allows suffering. That answer, built from three interlocking doctrines, was something mainstream Christianity has never had and still does not have. It was the crown jewel of what the Worldwide Church of God possessed, and it was among the first things the wolves threw away.

And Armstrong had errors. The Mark of the Beast taught as Sunday worship was wrong. The crushing tithing system — three tithes that ground families into the dirt — was a fiction that does not apply to Christians. The divorce and remarriage policy destroyed families. And Armstrong consistently refused to credit the sources he drew from, presenting inherited teachings as if they were personal revelations. This book is not a hit piece on Herbert Armstrong, and it is not a defense of him either. It is the truth about everything — what he got right, what he got wrong, and what was done to all of it after he died.

• • •

Which brings us to the critical piece of this chapter — the piece that sets up everything that follows in this book.

In February 1939, just five years into his ministry, Armstrong published an article in *The Good News of the Kingdom* titled “Did Christ Reorganize the Church?” It was a passionate, detailed, biblically argued case *against* centralized church government. And what he wrote in that article would come back to haunt the entire organization.

Armstrong wrote:

“All authority and power to rule is limited solely to each LOCAL congregation. But there is NO BIBLE AUTHORITY for any super-government, or organization with authority over the local congregations!”

He went further:

“Organization and church GOVERNMENT has brought us only strife, jealousies, divisions, bitterness! It is not of God, and it can bear no other fruit.”

And then he drove the point home with language that could not have been more forceful:

“How, then, did ORGANIZATION, and the idea of CHURCH GOVERNMENT get into the Church? It came out of BABYLON! Spiritual BABYLON — that is, ROME!”

Read those words carefully. In 1939, Herbert W. Armstrong called centralized church government *Babylonian*. He called it *satanic*. He said it was not of God and could bear no fruit other than strife, jealousy, division, and bitterness. He said there was *no Bible authority* for any organization having power over local congregations. He traced its origin not to Christ, not to the apostles, but to Rome.

This was not an offhand remark. This was a published, theological argument in the church’s own magazine.

• • •

And then he reversed himself.

By the early 1950s, Armstrong had done a complete 180. He declared himself an apostle. He installed a top-down, hierarchical government structure in which he held absolute authority as Pastor General, with all decisions flowing downward from his office through a chain of command: evangelists, pastors, preaching elders, local elders, deacons, and deaconesses. Questioning the government was tantamount to questioning God Himself. The man who had written that centralized government “came out of Babylon” now

made centralized government the defining doctrine of his organization.

How did this happen? How does a man go from calling centralized church government an abomination to making himself the undisputed head of exactly such a government?

The answer is that he didn't do it alone. Two men played critical roles in this reversal — one who provided the intellectual framework and one who enforced it with an iron fist. Without these two men, the government structure that Armstrong ultimately adopted — the very structure that would later be used as a weapon to destroy everything Armstrong had built — might never have existed.

Their names were Herman Hoeh and Roderick Meredith.

And they are the subject of the next chapter.

CHAPTER 2

The Architect and the Enforcer

If Herbert W. Armstrong was the voice of the Worldwide Church of God, two men were its backbone. One gave the organization its intellectual structure. The other gave it its iron spine. Without either of them, the church Armstrong built would have looked very different — and the weapon that was eventually used to destroy it might never have been forged.

Their names were Herman L. Hoeh and Roderick C. Meredith. And the roles they played in the history of the Worldwide Church of God cannot be overstated.

• • •

Herman Hoeh arrived at Ambassador College on October 8, 1947 — the very first day the school opened its doors. He was nineteen years old, from Santa Rosa, California, and he was one of only four students in the entire inaugural class. The other three were Raymond Cole, Richard David Armstrong (Herbert's elder son), and Betty Bates. That was it. Four students, a handful of faculty, and a small campus in Pasadena that most people in the city had never heard of.

Hoeh graduated in 1951 and was ordained by Armstrong on December 20, 1952. He would go on to earn his Ph.D. from Ambassador College's own Graduate School of Theology —

Armstrong's own school giving Armstrong's own student a degree — writing a two-volume *Compendium of World History* as his doctoral dissertation in 1962. He changed his mind on what he wrote in it multiple times over the years, and yet most in the church considered him some great professor because of the “Dr.” in front of his name. He became one of the most prolific writers in the church's history, editing and contributing to *The Plain Truth*, *The Good News*, and dozens of booklets on topics ranging from biblical history to prophecy to Christian living.

But Hoeh's most consequential contribution had nothing to do with history or journalism. It had to do with government.

In the early to mid-1950s, Herman Hoeh became the intellectual architect of the Worldwide Church of God's centralized government structure. He was the man who built the theological case for top-down, hierarchical authority flowing from one man at the top — the apostle — downward through ranks of evangelists, pastors, preaching elders, local elders, deacons, and deaconesses. He was the man who provided the scriptural and historical framework that allowed Herbert Armstrong to reverse his 1939 position and declare himself the sole human authority in God's church on earth.

And Hoeh didn't just build the structure — he created the cult of personality that held it together. At the Auditorium in Pasadena, with Armstrong sitting in the audience, Hoeh publicly referred to Armstrong as an “apostle.” Meredith told this story many times: Armstrong was initially furious and almost went up on stage to pull Hoeh off. But then after services he started to contemplate that maybe he was an apostle. Once that word was spoken publicly by a “Dr.,” it stuck. From that point on, questioning Armstrong wasn't just disagreeing with a man — it was rebelling against God's chosen apostle.

And we know this because Roderick Meredith himself admitted it in writing.

• • •

In 1993, after leaving the Worldwide Church of God and founding the Global Church of God, Meredith published a booklet titled *Church Government and Church Unity*. It was intended as a recruitment tool — a way to attract ministers and members who were leaving the WWCG by showing that his new organization would operate differently. In that booklet, Meredith made a stunning admission about the origins of the very government structure he had spent decades enforcing:

“Even after several years of guiding the college [which began in 1947], Mr. Armstrong still did not understand much about Church government. Consequently, in the early to mid-1950s, Herman Hoeh and I each were inspired to write articles along this line.”

Read that again. Slowly.

Meredith admitted — in black and white, in his own booklet, with his name on the cover — that Herbert Armstrong *did not understand church government* even after running Ambassador College for several years. And that it was Hoeh and Meredith themselves who formulated the doctrine that would define the organization for the next four decades.

One planted. The other watered. And Armstrong adopted what they grew.

This is not speculation. This is not the claim of a disgruntled ex-member or an outside critic. This is Roderick C. Meredith’s own published admission. The government structure of the Worldwide Church of God — the structure that gave one man absolute power,

that made questioning authority tantamount to questioning God, that would eventually be weaponized by Joseph Tkach to destroy the very truths it was supposed to protect — was conceived and formulated not by Herbert Armstrong, but by two of his earliest students.

• • •

Hoeh was the architect. He provided the intellectual framework — the historical arguments, the scriptural interpretations, the theological scaffolding that made centralized government look like God’s design rather than man’s invention. Hoeh was brilliant, deeply read, and utterly convinced of his own scholarship. He wrote with the quiet authority of an academic who believes he has uncovered the truth and sees no reason to hedge. When Hoeh put pen to paper and declared that God’s church had always been governed from the top down, it carried the weight of a man who had spent years buried in ancient texts and church history.

But Hoeh’s contributions to the organization went far beyond government. He authored “The Crucifixion Was Not on Friday,” the companion piece to Armstrong’s “The Resurrection Was Not on Sunday” — the teaching that Christ was crucified on a Wednesday and was resurrected exactly seventy-two hours later on a Saturday afternoon. To make it work, Hoeh manipulated the Hebrew calendar intercalary cycle to force a Wednesday Passover in 31 AD, and members never questioned it because they had no knowledge of how to calculate the calendar themselves. He was deeply involved in the church’s calendar calculations, determining the dates for the annual holy days. In 1956, he co-authored *1975 in Prophecy*, the booklet he and Armstrong wrote together that predicted dramatic prophetic events by that year and caused enormous damage to the church’s credibility when those events failed to materialize — another failed prediction with Hoeh’s fingerprints all over it. And he wrote *A True*

History of the True Church, the church's definitive account of how God's faithful people had survived through the centuries.

In short, Herman Hoeh was the brain of the operation. If Armstrong was the voice that proclaimed the message, Hoeh was the mind that constructed much of what was proclaimed.

• • •

And then there was Meredith.

Roderick C. Meredith was born on June 21, 1930, in Joplin, Missouri. He was an athlete in high school — a Missouri state track champion who ran the mile in 4:23, an elite time that could have earned him a track scholarship anywhere in the country, and a Golden Gloves boxing champion. He enrolled at Ambassador College and graduated in 1952. On December 20 of that year, Armstrong ordained him and four other men as evangelists — the first five men ever to hold that rank in the church. Meredith was the youngest of the five.

If Hoeh was the architect, Meredith was the enforcer.

Over the following years, Meredith raised up scores of congregations across the United States. He conducted baptizing tours in the U.S., the United Kingdom, Europe, and Africa. From the early to mid-1950s, and again in 1960, Armstrong sent him to Britain to establish congregations there. He served as the second Vice President of both the Worldwide Church of God and Ambassador College. He was Deputy Chancellor at all three Ambassador campuses — Pasadena, Bricket Wood (England), and Big Sandy (Texas). He served as Director of Church Administration, overseeing the entire worldwide ministry. He pastored the church's largest congregation in Los Angeles. He sat on the Council of Elders and the Corporate Board of Directors.

Meredith was everywhere. He was Armstrong's right hand in ways that few other men ever were. And he enforced the government structure with a firmness that earned him both deep loyalty and deep resentment, depending on which side of his authority you stood.

But here is the critical point that most people miss when they talk about Roderick Meredith, and it is a point that this book will make clearly: Meredith was far more than just an enforcer. He was a stabilizer. He was the man who held things together when they were falling apart.

• • •

The 1970s nearly destroyed the Worldwide Church of God.

It was a decade of crisis on every front. Internally, liberal ministers at headquarters were quietly watering down the pure doctrines that Armstrong had taught. The Systematic Theology Project — an attempt to codify church doctrine that was heavily influenced by liberal-leaning theologians on the faculty — pushed the church toward positions that Armstrong had spent decades opposing. Divorce and remarriage policies were loosened. The dating of Pentecost was changed. The strict standards that had defined the church's identity were being eroded from within.

The Pentecost change and the liberalization of divorce and remarriage proved too much for Raymond Cole — one of the original four Ambassador College students, Hoeh's roommate at AC, and an ordained evangelist since 1952. Cole left the WWCG in 1974–75, believing that Armstrong had been divinely chosen to restore truth and that those doctrines could not be changed. He founded the Church of God, the Eternal, and never looked back. His brother C. Wayne Cole was disfellowshipped in 1979 during the receivership crisis. The Cole family had come from the same Church of God congregation in Oregon that Armstrong himself had come

out of — a deep historical connection to the earliest roots of the work, and now severed.

Externally, Garner Ted Armstrong — Herbert's son, the charismatic television host who had become the public face of *The World Tomorrow* broadcast — was suspended in 1972 over reports of extramarital affairs. He returned, but the pattern continued, and in 1978 he was permanently disfellowshipped. His departure was a body blow to the organization. For millions of viewers and listeners, Garner Ted *was* the Worldwide Church of God.

And then came the receivership. In January 1979, the State of California's attorney general placed the Worldwide Church of God in temporary receivership, seizing financial records and effectively attempting to take control of the church's operations. It was an unprecedented assault on a religious organization, and it threatened to destroy everything Armstrong had built.

Through all of this — the liberal drift, the Garner Ted scandal, the receivership crisis — Roderick Meredith was one of the men who held the line. His firm hand, his unwavering commitment to the doctrines Armstrong had established, and his willingness to stand up and fight when others were wavering helped hold the organization together during its darkest hours. When Armstrong commanded his top men to do everything possible to protect the church during the receivership, Meredith was one of the men he named.

Armstrong eventually cleaned house. Beginning in 1979, he reasserted his authority, removed the liberal influences, rejected the Systematic Theology Project, and put the church back on course. And Meredith was instrumental in making that happen.

Did Meredith have his flaws? Of course. He could be rigid. He could be harsh. He gained a reputation in the 1960s for being too strict in his application of church rules, and in 1980 Armstrong sent him to

Hawaii based on accusations made against him — though Armstrong later brought him back to the mainland and restored him to a leadership position on the Council of Elders. Meredith was not a perfect man. But perfection was never the requirement. Faithfulness was. And during the 1970s, when the church needed men who would not bend, Meredith did not bend.

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So here was the power structure of the Worldwide Church of God as it existed through the peak years of the organization:

Armstrong was the voice. He was the apostle, the Pastor General, the man whose name was on the broadcast and the magazine, the man who met with kings and presidents, the man who proclaimed the message to the world.

Hoeh was the architect. He built the intellectual and theological framework that undergirded the organization — the government structure, the prophetic timelines, the historical narrative, the doctrinal scaffolding. He didn't stand at the pulpit. He stood behind the curtain, constructing the stage.

Meredith was the stabilizer. He enforced what Hoeh designed and Armstrong proclaimed. He held the ministry in line. He kept the organization from flying apart during the crises of the 1970s. He was the firm hand that kept the ship steady when the seas got rough.

One voice. One mind. One fist.

Together, these three men built an organization that reached every continent on earth, published a magazine with a larger circulation than *Time*, and brought a message to millions of people that no other church was willing to preach.

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But there was a fatal flaw built into the foundation, and it was this: the government structure that Hoeh designed, that Meredith enforced, and that Armstrong made doctrine was not dependent on the character of the man at the top. It was dependent on the *office*.

As long as Armstrong occupied the office, the system worked — or at least appeared to work — because Armstrong, whatever his faults, was genuinely committed to the truths he taught. He believed what he preached. He may have reversed his 1939 position on government, but he did not reverse his commitment to the Sabbath, the holy days, clean and unclean meats, the nature of God, the gospel of the kingdom, and the other foundational doctrines that defined the church.

But the system Hoeh and Meredith built had no safeguard for what would happen if a man who did *not* believe those truths occupied that office. The structure gave absolute power to whoever sat in the Pastor General's chair. And absolute power, as the old saying goes, corrupts absolutely.

Armstrong died on January 16, 1986. And the man who sat down in his chair was Joseph W. Tkach.

The machine that Hoeh had designed, that Meredith had enforced, and that Armstrong had sanctified was about to be turned against the very truths it was built to protect.

And that is the subject of the next chapter.

CHAPTER 3

The Takeover

Before we meet the man who destroyed the Worldwide Church of God, we need to talk about the man who should have led it.

His name was Richard David Armstrong. He was Herbert's elder son, and by every account, he was the one being groomed to carry the torch.

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Richard was born in 1928 in Oregon. He was one of the original four students at Ambassador College when it opened in 1947. He graduated in 1952 and was ordained an evangelist by his father on December 20 of that same year — the same day Roderick Meredith and three other men received the same rank. He served as student body president. He was studious, devoted, serious about the work. He was not his brother Garner Ted — the charming, charismatic, reckless younger son who would later become the television face of *The World Tomorrow* and then implode in a series of scandals. Richard was the steady one. The faithful one. The heir.

On July 23, 1958, Richard was on a baptizing tour in central California. He was riding as a passenger while minister Alton Billingsley drove north on Coast Highway 101. At some point, the four-lane divided highway merged into a two-lane road. Neither

man noticed the change. The car crossed into oncoming traffic. The collision was devastating.

Richard was rushed to the hospital in San Luis Obispo. Armstrong flew to his son's side. For a week, Richard lay in critical condition. His kidneys failed. Specialists were called in from UCLA. On the evening of July 29, doctors attempted to transport him by ambulance to the UCLA Medical Center in Los Angeles, where an artificial kidney might save his life. It was too late. Richard David Armstrong died on the morning of July 30, 1958. He was twenty-nine years old.

Armstrong called his son's death the loss of "the first real martyr for God's cause in these latter days."

But the real impact of Richard's death would not be felt for decades. It would be felt on January 16, 1986.

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Think about what might have been.

Had Richard David Armstrong lived, he almost certainly would have succeeded his father as Pastor General. He was the firstborn son, the trained minister, the Ambassador graduate, the man being prepared for leadership from the beginning. He was doctrinally sound, personally disciplined, and deeply committed to the truths his father taught. There is every reason to believe that under Richard's leadership, the Worldwide Church of God would have continued on the course Armstrong had set.

But Richard died on a California highway in 1958. And with his death, the succession plan — such as it was — died with him.

Garner Ted, the younger son, stepped into the spotlight. He was gifted on camera. He had a voice like Paul Harvey and a presence that commanded attention. For years, he *was* the public face of the

Worldwide Church of God, hosting *The World Tomorrow* on both radio and television. But Garner Ted's personal life was a slow-motion catastrophe. Repeated reports of extramarital affairs led to his suspension in 1972. He returned, but the behavior continued. In 1978, Armstrong permanently disfellowshipped his own son.

So by 1986, when Herbert Armstrong lay dying at ninety-three, the two men who might have naturally succeeded him were both gone — one dead, one expelled. Armstrong had no obvious heir. No one in the organization had been publicly prepared for the role. No transition plan had been communicated to the membership.

And that vacuum is how Joseph W. Tkach ended up in the Pastor General's chair.

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Joseph William Tkach was born on March 16, 1927, in Chicago, Illinois, to a working-class family of Eastern European descent. He served in the U.S. Navy during World War II, then returned to Chicago and worked at Hupp Aviation. In 1951 he married Elaine Apostolos, and they had three children: Joe Jr., Tanya, and Jennifer.

At least, that is the official version. The reality was something else. The WCG claimed Tkach attended the Illinois Institute of Technology. When journalist John Trechak investigated, IIT responded: "I regret to inform you that we are unable to locate any record of Joseph W. Tkach." School records showed he started at Gage Park High School, then transferred to Tilden High School — but Tilden had no record of him either. The church claimed he was a supervisor at Hupp Aviation. An older engineer who remembered Tkach confirmed: "Oh no," he was never a manager or supervisor. The man's entire background was fabricated.

But it gets worse. While Tkach was still in Chicago, he was siphoning funds from the poor fund and third tithe accounts. His method was classic: he made loans to needy church members, labeled them as gifts on the books, and then pocketed the cash when the loans were repaid. Members who came to him for help were told it was a loan that had to be repaid to Tkach personally in cash. This was documented by Earl Timmons, a church member who later sold his Pasadena home and went into hiding, fearing for his life after what he knew became known.

Tkach was baptized into the Worldwide Church of God in 1957. In 1966, he moved his family to Pasadena and enrolled in classes at Ambassador College. He was ordained a preaching elder in 1974. He was not a scholar. He was not a theologian. He was not a gifted writer or speaker. What he was, by all accounts, was a loyal administrator — a company man who followed orders, showed up when needed, and never rocked the boat.

His big break came during the receivership crisis of 1979. When the State of California placed the church in temporary receivership, Tkach took an active and visible role in the defense of Armstrong and the headquarters operation. Armstrong noticed. In July 1979, Tkach was named Director of Ministerial Services — a powerful position that gave him oversight of the entire ministry — and was ordained an evangelist, the second-highest ministerial rank in the church. In March 1981, Armstrong appointed him to the Advisory Council of Elders.

It is worth pausing here to note something. Roderick Meredith had previously held the position of Director of Church Administration — essentially the same oversight role over the ministry that Tkach was now being given. Meredith was removed from that position and sent to Hawaii in 1980. There is a persistent rumor that one of the reasons Meredith was sidelined was his refusal to ordain Tkach as

an evangelist. Whether that rumor is true or not, the effect was the same: Meredith was out, Tkach was in, and the man who had held the ministry together during the 1970s was replaced by a man whose primary qualification was loyalty. After Armstrong died, it got worse. Meredith was muzzled for three years under Tkach — an evangelist with over three decades of ministry experience, reduced to conducting a Ladies' Bible Study. That was deliberate humiliation, and Meredith endured it for as long as he could before finally being fired in December 1992.

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On January 7, 1986, Herbert W. Armstrong lay gravely ill in his Pasadena home. He was ninety-three years old and failing rapidly. According to the *Worldwide News*, Armstrong told his Advisory Council of Elders that day of his decision to appoint Joseph W. Tkach as his successor in the event of his death. He signed the official documents transferring authority.

Nine days later, Armstrong was dead.

And just like that, Joseph W. Tkach became the Pastor General of the Worldwide Church of God, the Chancellor of Ambassador College, the President of the Ambassador International Cultural Foundation, the Publisher of *The Plain Truth* magazine, and the Chairman of the Board of the WCG and all its subsidiary corporations. Every title. Every office. Every ounce of authority that the government structure had concentrated in one man's hands now belonged to Joe Tkach.

There was a ceremony in the Ambassador Auditorium. Tkach stood before the assembled membership and pledged — publicly, solemnly, with the whole church watching — to follow in Herbert Armstrong's footsteps. To continue the work. To preserve the truth. To keep the faith.

The congregation believed him. Why wouldn't they? The government structure told them to. The system that Hoeh had designed, that Meredith had enforced, and that Armstrong had made doctrine demanded that whoever occupied the office be obeyed as God's chosen leader. And Tkach was now in the office. Questioning him was the same as questioning God.

That was the beauty of the trap. The very structure that was supposed to protect the truth had been designed in a way that made it impossible to challenge whoever sat at the top — even if the man at the top was about to burn the whole thing down.

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There is a rumor — and it has circulated for decades among longtime members — that Armstrong wanted Meredith to succeed him. That on his deathbed, it was Meredith he really wanted in the chair. But the real story, as revealed by Aaron Dean, Armstrong's personal aide who was in the room during those final days, is more complicated and more devastating. According to Dean, Armstrong deliberately passed over Meredith for the succession because he feared that Meredith could talk other council members into appointing him. Armstrong was afraid of Meredith's influence. Dean then adds the irony: "Interesting that those HWA named did go with RCM." The very men Armstrong trusted on the Advisory Council of Elders — the ones he chose instead of Meredith — eventually followed Meredith anyway.

So why Tkach? Leon Walker, a senior minister who knew Armstrong well, later provided the answer directly. In 1995, Walker quoted Armstrong as saying: "One thing I know about Mr. Tkach: He will not change doctrine." Armstrong chose Tkach based on his "strength, firmness, and dogged determination in the receivership crisis of 1979." Tkach earned Armstrong's trust through loyalty

during a crisis — and that is classic con artist behavior. Make the big deposit so you can make the bigger withdrawal later.

Whether Armstrong made the right call or the wrong one, the result was the same. The man who ended up in the chair was not the man who had held the church together during the crises of the 1970s. It was not the man who had refused to bend when the doctrines were under assault. It was not the man who had built congregations across the country and around the world. It was a career administrator from Chicago who couldn't write his own sermons.

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But Tkach was not acting alone. That is the part of the story that most members never understood until it was too late.

Behind Tkach stood a small circle of men who wielded the real intellectual power in the new administration. They were the ones who shaped the ideas, drafted the documents, wrote the articles that appeared under Tkach's name, and orchestrated the doctrinal changes that would gut the church over the next decade. If Tkach was the front man, these were the puppet masters.

The most influential among them was his own son, Joseph Tkach Jr. — “Joe Jr.” — who would later succeed his father as Pastor General and who would later write a book called *Transformed by Truth* in which he openly celebrated the destruction of everything Armstrong had taught. Joe Jr. was smart, articulate, and ideologically driven in a way his father was not. Where the elder Tkach was a blunt instrument, Joe Jr. was a scalpel.

Alongside Joe Jr. was J. Michael Feazell, who served as Tkach's personal assistant and closest advisor. Feazell was ordained an evangelist by Tkach in 1990 and later authored *The Liberation of the Worldwide Church of God*, another book that celebrated the

doctrinal demolition. He and Joe Jr. were the primary architects of the theological changes.

The third key figure was Bernie Schnippert, who had once served as an assistant to Stanley Rader (Armstrong’s controversial personal attorney and advisor). Schnippert was ordained an evangelist by Tkach in 1990. He had been deeply involved in the Systematic Theology Project of the late 1970s — the same liberal doctrinal initiative that Armstrong had personally rejected and shut down. The ideas that Armstrong had thrown out were about to come back, repackaged under new management.

These three men — Joe Jr., Feazell, and Schnippert — formed the inner circle. Some in the church called them the “Gang of Four,” counting the elder Tkach himself. But the truth is that Tkach Sr. was more figurehead than leader. The intellectual horsepower, the strategic planning, and the ideological vision came from the men standing behind him.

And they were installed on Day One. Armstrong had specifically warned Tkach: “If you bring your staff up, they’ll lead you astray.” Aaron Dean confirmed that Tkach made it clear on January 16 — the very day Armstrong died — that his staff was coming. Within two years: Don Ward was installed as Ambassador College president, Bernie Schnippert took control of all media operations, Joe Tkach Jr. was put in charge of the ministry, Michael Feazell became executive assistant and ghost writer, and Greg Albrecht took over the Plain Truth. All five were made evangelists after Armstrong died. Armstrong’s own evangelists “quickly faded into the background.” McCullough was shipped to South Africa in July 1986 — barely six months after Armstrong’s death.

Where did these men get their theology? Not from the Bible. Feazell and Albrecht both trained at Azusa Pacific University — a

mainstream evangelical institution that taught the very doctrines the Worldwide Church of God had spent fifty years opposing. They went to the enemy's school and brought the enemy's theology back into the church.

And there is something that tells you everything you need to know about the character of these men. It was widely known among Pasadena insiders that Feazell, Tkach Jr., Albrecht, and Schnippert watched college football games in the basement of the Ambassador Auditorium during Sabbath services going on upstairs. They ate donuts during the Days of Unleavened Bread. This was not ignorance. This was deliberate mockery. These were not men led by the Holy Spirit to make doctrinal changes. They never believed the doctrines. They were infiltrators who endured the teachings long enough to get into positions of power, then burned the whole thing down.

Years later, just a year before Tkach Sr. died, he was challenged for letting the staff change doctrines. He spoke up and said: "No, I did this. I believed this back in the '70s." Aaron Dean responded: "You told Mr. Armstrong you believed what was being taught, and now you say you didn't. Are you lying now or did you lie to him then?" Tkach dismissed the meeting and left. This proves Tkach had been deceiving Armstrong for years — a long con, not a man who "grew in understanding."

One more detail. Gerald Waterhouse, the church's traveling evangelist, used to argue that "Tkach" means "weaver" in Ukrainian — supposed proof of his divine calling. When I heard this, I immediately thought: yes, he is a weaver — weaving heresy with truth. That is the con artist's method. Always mix truth with the lie to make the lie go down easier.

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And there was something else about Tkach that the membership did not know.

When Tkach first moved to Pasadena from Chicago, he was carrying on an affair with a woman back in Chicago. This was not a rumor. This was known among certain people at headquarters. A man who was violating one of the Ten Commandments while simultaneously climbing the ministerial ladder — and the congregation had no idea.

And there was the matter of his wife. Elaine Tkach suffered a mental breakdown in the mid-1960s, losing contact with reality. There were destructive rampages, trance-like states, what some described as “zombie” behavior. Some in the church believed she was demon possessed. The timing is significant: the mid-1960s was right around when Tkach moved the family to Pasadena in 1966.

Think about that. A man whose educational credentials were fabricated. A man who was stealing from the church’s poor fund. A man who was having an affair. A man whose wife had suffered a mental breakdown. A man who couldn’t write his own sermons, had no theological depth, and had no original ideas. A man whose primary talent was organizational loyalty and political maneuvering. And yet the entire Worldwide Church of God — 145,000 members, 800 congregations, a global operation worth hundreds of millions of dollars — placed its trust in him as God’s chosen leader.

Why?

Because the government structure demanded it. Because the system said that whoever occupied the office spoke for God. Because the machine that Hoeh built, that Meredith enforced, and that Armstrong sanctified had no mechanism for the membership to say, “Wait. Something is wrong. This man is not what he appears to be.”

The trap was set. The wolf was in the shepherd's chair. And the flock had been trained — by decades of teaching on government and authority and obedience — to sit quietly and do what they were told.

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Looking back, the succession from Armstrong to Tkach was the single most consequential event in the history of the Worldwide Church of God. More consequential than the founding. More consequential than the growth. More consequential than the receivership crisis or the Garner Ted scandal or any of the other crises that had come before.

Because every crisis before this one had come from outside the Pastor General's office. The receivership came from the state government. Garner Ted's scandals came from personal sin. The liberal drift of the 1970s came from rogue ministers and academics. In every case, the Pastor General's office was the firewall. Armstrong could clean house because the authority to clean house resided in the office he held.

But what happens when the threat *is* the office? What happens when the wolf doesn't break in through the back door but walks in through the front door, sits down in the big chair, and puts on the shepherd's robe?

What happens is exactly what happened.

The con begins.

And that is the subject of the next chapter.

CHAPTER 4

The Con Begins

Every con artist knows the same thing: you don't start with the big lie. You start with the small one.

You test the mark. You see how much he'll swallow. You watch his eyes. You watch his body language. You gauge his resistance. And if the small lie goes down smooth — if nobody flinches, nobody pushes back, nobody asks the hard question — then you know the mark is ready. You move to the next lie. A little bigger this time. A little bolder. And then the next one. And the next. Each one building on the last, each one stretching the mark's tolerance a little further, until one day you're feeding him something that would have been unthinkable at the beginning — and he's eating it out of your hand.

That is exactly how the Worldwide Church of God was destroyed.

Not in one dramatic moment. Not in a single sermon or a single article or a single announcement. It was done in stages. Carefully. Deliberately. Methodically. Each change tested the waters. Each change gauged the reaction. And each time the congregation accepted the change without revolt, the men behind the curtain knew they could push further.

Joe Tkach Jr. later described this strategy openly. He called it “two steps forward, one step back.” You make a change. If the resistance

is too strong, you soften the language, slow down, reassure the congregation that nothing fundamental has changed. Then, when the dust settles, you take the next step. And the next. And the next. Always forward. Always toward the same destination. But never fast enough to trigger the alarm.

It was a masterpiece of deception. And it began within months of Armstrong's death.

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March 23, 1987

Fourteen months after Armstrong's death, Tkach made his first move.

On March 23, 1987, the *Worldwide News* published a major article by Tkach titled "New Understanding of the Meaning of Christ's Broken Body and the Church's Teaching on HEALING." The article announced, as Tkach put it, that Christ had revealed "additional new truth to His church" on the subject of divine healing and the use of medicine.

This was the first doctrinal change. And it was not small.

For over fifty years, the Worldwide Church of God had taught that Christians should rely primarily on God for healing. Members were taught to go to doctors for diagnosis but to trust God for healing. They didn't carry health insurance. They avoided most medications. Some members had died rather than seek medical treatment. Armstrong had taught this doctrine consistently from the earliest days of his ministry, and he had reinforced it with a major booklet in the early 1980s that specifically attacked the liberal position on healing that had crept in during the 1970s.

That liberal position — the idea that Christians could freely use doctors and medicine without it being a lack of faith — had been advanced during the turbulent 1970s as part of the broader liberalization that Armstrong spent the last years of his life fighting. Ministers like David Antion had written papers arguing for a relaxed approach to healing and medicine as early as 1975. The Systematic Theology Project of the late 1970s had pushed in the same direction. And Bernie Schnippert — the same Bernie Schnippert who was now part of Tkach’s inner circle — had been deeply involved in that very project.

Armstrong had rejected all of it. He cleaned house in 1979. He wrote his own healing booklet in the early 1980s specifically to *refute* the liberal position and to reestablish the church’s traditional teaching on divine healing. That booklet was Armstrong’s definitive, final word on the subject.

And now, barely a year after Armstrong’s death, Tkach was publishing the exact opposite position — the same liberal position that Armstrong had personally rejected, repackaged as “new understanding.”

It was the 1970s all over again. The same ideas. The same arguments. The same liberal slide toward mainstream Protestantism. The only difference was the label. In the 1970s, it was called the Systematic Theology Project. In 1987, it was called “new truth revealed by Christ.” Same product. New packaging.

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Now, there is a detail here that the average member would have missed — a detail that only someone who had been paying very close attention would have caught.

Armstrong’s healing booklet from the early 1980s and Tkach’s 1987 healing article were not merely different. They were *opposite*. Armstrong’s booklet was a direct attack on the very position Tkach was now promoting. It was as if Tkach had read Armstrong’s booklet, disagreed with every word of it, and then published his own article saying the opposite — but without ever acknowledging that he was reversing the dead apostle’s explicit teaching.

He didn’t say, “Mr. Armstrong was wrong about healing.” He couldn’t say that — not yet. The membership would have revolted. Instead, he said Christ had revealed “additional new truth.” He framed it as an *addition* to what Armstrong had taught, not a *contradiction* of it. He wrapped the reversal in the language of progress and revelation and growth, so that anyone who objected could be accused of resisting God’s “new understanding.”

This is classic con artist technique. You don’t tell the mark you’re changing the deal. You tell the mark you’re *improving* the deal. You tell him he’s getting *more* than what he had before. And if he objects, you make him feel like he’s the one with the problem — like he’s too rigid, too fearful, too stuck in the past to accept what God is doing now.

The healing change was the test. It was the small lie. And the congregation swallowed it.

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June 22, 1987

Three months after changing the healing doctrine — with no revolt, no mass exodus, and no consequences — Tkach played his next card. On June 22, 1987, he published a “Personal” in the *Worldwide News* — the church’s internal newspaper — addressing the makeup doctrine.

For decades, Armstrong had taught that wearing makeup was vanity and a sin. It was one of the church's more visible and controversial teachings, and it had caused no small amount of tension among the membership, particularly among women who had grown up wearing cosmetics and were told to stop when they entered the church. The doctrine had actually been changed once before — Armstrong had briefly relaxed the ban in the 1970s during the liberal period, then reinstated it during the cleanup of 1979. By the time Armstrong died, the no-makeup policy was firmly in place.

Tkach's June 1987 article addressed the issue directly. And what he wrote was unambiguous. He called the idea that he would change the ruling a "mistaken impression." He assured the membership — in black and white, in the church's own publication, over his own name — that the church would *never* change the makeup doctrine. Never. He used the strongest possible language. He put the congregation at ease. He told them, in effect: *I am continuing what Mr. Armstrong taught. You have nothing to worry about. This is settled.*

The congregation believed him. They had been trained to believe whoever sat in the Pastor General's chair. And Tkach had just told them, in the most definitive terms possible, that the makeup doctrine was permanent. He invoked the authority of Jesus Christ. He invoked the return of Christ. He made it sound like the word of God Himself had settled the matter.

But there was one line buried in the article that most members glossed over. One carefully planted sentence: "As with any matter, we must also be willing to change, should God show us we may have been wrong." That was the escape hatch. That was the con artist leaving himself a back door while locking the front door with the word "never." He was already planning the reversal when he wrote the article.

Remember that article. Remember the word “never.” Because what happened next is the key that unlocks everything.

• • •

November 14, 1988

Now came the moment that changed everything.

On November 14, 1988, Joseph W. Tkach reversed the makeup ban. Women in the Worldwide Church of God were now permitted to wear cosmetics. He called the previous position “this unnecessary stumbling block” — inadvertently admitting that he himself had been responsible for placing that stumbling block before God’s people, since he was the one who had written the June 1987 article enforcing it. He never acknowledged that. Instead, he blamed Armstrong’s history with the issue, made Armstrong the fall guy, and never once confessed his own part in any of it.

By itself, this might seem like a minor issue. Makeup. Cosmetics. Who cares? Plenty of members were probably relieved. It was one of those teachings that had always been hard to enforce and harder to explain. In the grand scheme of biblical doctrine, whether or not a woman wore lipstick to Sabbath services was not exactly on par with the Sabbath itself or the holy days or the nature of God.

But the significance of the makeup change had nothing to do with makeup. It had everything to do with what it revealed about the man who made it.

Because now two articles existed side by side. Two articles written by the same man, published in the same newspaper, bearing the same signature.

The first article, from June 22, 1987, said the church would *never* change the makeup doctrine.

The second article, from November 14, 1988, changed the makeup doctrine.

Never. And then now.

If you put those two articles on a table and read them back to back — which is exactly what I did in November 1988 — the conclusion was inescapable. This man was a liar. Not a man who had grown in understanding. Not a man who had received new revelation from God. A liar. A man who had looked his congregation in the eye, told them “never,” and then done it anyway. A man who had deliberately used the strongest possible language to put the congregation at ease — and then betrayed that trust the moment he was ready to move.

That is not how a man of God operates. That is how a con artist operates.

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Most members never put the two articles together. They read the 1987 article when it came out, felt reassured, and filed it away. They read the 1988 article when it came out, shrugged, and moved on. They never laid the two side by side. They never asked the obvious question: *How can a man say “never” in 1987 and then do it in 1988?*

But I asked that question. Because I had been trained to ask that question.

When you grow up watching a con artist operate, you learn that the most important thing is not what the con man says *now*. It is what the con man said *before*. Because the con man’s greatest vulnerability is his own mouth. He talks too much. He makes promises he doesn’t intend to keep. He uses absolute language — “never,” “always,” “I guarantee” — because absolute language is what closes the deal and puts the mark at ease. But absolute language

is also what convicts him when he breaks the promise. All you have to do is remember what he said.

My stepfather taught me that. Not intentionally. But I learned it by watching him. And in November 1988, sitting at my kitchen table with those two articles in front of me, I recognized the pattern instantly.

The Worldwide Church of God was being conned.

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And now the healing change — the one that had come first, back in March 1987 — made perfect sense in the larger context.

The healing doctrine was the test run. It was the trial balloon. Tkach and his handlers needed to know: *Can we change a major doctrine and get away with it?* The healing change was major enough to matter but not visible enough to cause a mass exodus. Members might grumble. Ministers might raise an eyebrow. But nobody was going to leave the church over the question of whether it was acceptable to take aspirin.

And they were right. Nobody left. The congregation absorbed the change, adjusted, and moved on. The test was a success.

Then came the makeup change. Another test. Smaller in doctrinal significance but enormous in what it revealed. Because now the pattern was established. Now the two-step-forward, one-step-back strategy was operational. Now the inner circle knew that the congregation could be moved — slowly, carefully, one doctrine at a time — without triggering a revolt.

The con was up and running.

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There is a passage of Scripture that describes exactly what was happening, and it describes it with precision that sends a chill down your spine when you read it in context.

Revelation 2:24–25 (NLT): “But I also have a message for the rest of you in Thyatira who have not followed this false teaching (‘deeper truths,’ as they call them — depths of Satan, actually). I will ask nothing more of you except that you hold tightly to what you have until I come.”

“Deeper truths.” That is the phrase. That is the exact language. Christ Himself warned that false teachers would come into the church and sell their deception using the language of progress and enlightenment. They would call their lies “deeper truths.” They would frame their destruction as “new understanding.” They would make the congregation feel that questioning the changes was the same as resisting the work of God.

And what did Tkach and his handlers call their changes?

“New truth.”

“New understanding.”

“Deeper understanding.”

The *exact* terminology. The *exact* language. The *exact* sales pitch that Christ warned about in Revelation, two thousand years before Joseph Tkach ever set foot in Pasadena. The very words Christ said Satan would use are the words Tkach and his team used to sell the destruction of God’s church.

This was not a coincidence. This was not an accident. This was not a group of well-meaning men who happened to choose unfortunate phrasing. This was the depths of Satan. Exactly as Christ said it would be. Using exactly the language Christ said it would use.

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The strategy was diabolical in its simplicity, and it followed a pattern that any experienced con man would recognize immediately.

Step one: Reassure the mark. Tell him nothing is going to change. Use the strongest possible language. Say “never.” Put him at ease. Build the trust.

Step two: Make a small change. Frame it as “new truth” or “deeper understanding.” Make it something that sounds reasonable, even beneficial. If anyone objects, accuse them of being rigid, fearful, or resistant to God’s leading.

Step three: If the small change is accepted, make a bigger one. If resistance is strong, slow down. Take one step back. Reassure again. Then take two steps forward.

Step four: Repeat. Again and again and again, each time pushing the boundary a little further, each time testing the congregation’s tolerance, each time moving closer to the real objective.

Step five: By the time the congregation realizes what has happened, it is too late. The doctrines have been gutted. The organization has been transformed. And the men who did it are writing books celebrating their achievement.

That is the con. That is how it works. That is how it has *always* worked — whether the con man is a street hustler in Philadelphia, a televangelist in a thousand-dollar suit, or a Pastor General standing behind a pulpit in Pasadena.

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Between 1987 and 1988, the foundation was laid. The healing change proved the congregation could be moved. The makeup reversal proved the Pastor General could say “never” and then do it

anyway without consequence. And the language of “new truth” and “deeper understanding” proved that the congregation would accept the destruction of their own beliefs as long as it was wrapped in spiritual-sounding vocabulary.

The con had begun. The tests had been passed. The mark was ready.

What came next was the systematic demolition of everything Herbert W. Armstrong had spent fifty-two years building.

And that is the subject of the next chapter.

THE DEPTHS OF **SATAN**

*How Wolves Devoured
the Worldwide Church of God
& Why It Was Nothing New*



MICHAEL H. EXTON

CHAPTER 5

The Doctrinal Demolition

Once the tests were passed and the strategy was proven, the demolition began in earnest.

Between 1987 and 1994, the Worldwide Church of God underwent the most comprehensive doctrinal transformation in the history of American religion. There is no comparable example. No other major religious organization has ever reversed virtually its entire system of beliefs while keeping the same name, the same building, the same leadership, and the same congregation sitting in the same pews. What happened to the Worldwide Church of God was not a reformation. It was an execution — carried out from the inside, in slow motion, one doctrine at a time, while the congregation was told at every step that nothing fundamental was changing.

Joe Tkach Jr. later described the process using his own metaphor. He called it a “row of dominoes.” Each time one doctrine was addressed, it knocked over several more that had to be dealt with next. One by one by one, the dominoes fell. And by the time the last one hit the table, the Worldwide Church of God was unrecognizable.

Here is how they did it.

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The healing change came first, in March 1987. That was the trial balloon, as we saw in the last chapter. Then came the makeup

reversal in November 1988. Those two changes tested the waters and proved the congregation could be moved.

And they had the data to prove it. In 1988, a report was read in church services stating the top five reasons second-generation members stayed in the Worldwide Church of God: family, friendships, SEP summer camp, Ambassador College, and romance. Not one mention of God. Not one mention of His truths. The spiritual rot was already deep. Most members were socially attached, not doctrinally convicted — and the inner circle knew it. If the bonds holding people to the church were social rather than theological, then the theology could be changed and most would stay.

And that is exactly what they calculated. As early as 1988, it was “informal knowledge” among WCG staffers in Pasadena that Tkach Jr. had said he was willing to lose up to fifty percent of the membership to push through major doctrinal changes. They had already done the math. A two-hundred-million-dollar-a-year organization could be brought down to thirty or forty million and still survive — and the doctrines they wanted gone would be gone. They were willing to destroy more than half the church to get what they wanted. And they did.

But the next target was far more significant than healing or cosmetics. The next target was the nature of God Himself.

Herbert Armstrong had taught that God was not a trinity. He taught that the Godhead consisted of two beings — God the Father and Jesus Christ, the Word — and that the Holy Spirit was not a separate person but the power and mind of God. This was one of the most distinctive and foundational doctrines of the Worldwide Church of God. It set the church apart from virtually every mainstream denomination in Christendom. And it was directly tied to

Armstrong’s teaching about the incredible human potential — that human beings were destined to be born into the very family of God, not as a metaphor but as a literal reality.

In 1989, the inner circle began moving on this doctrine. A paper by a WCG minister named Kyriakos Stavrinides, who had been educated at a mainstream seminary, argued in favor of the trinity. The paper circulated among the leadership. Joe Jr., Feazell, and Schnippert embraced it. By 1993, the church had produced a booklet titled “God Is...” that formally shifted the church’s position toward a trinitarian understanding of God. The booklet was ghost-written by the same inner circle — Joe Jr., Feazell, and Schnippert — the men who had been engineering the changes from the beginning.

The “God Is” booklet was a masterpiece of misdirection. It didn’t come right out and say, “We now believe in the trinity.” That would have been too blunt, too honest, too easy for the membership to reject. Instead, it reframed the discussion. It used language that sounded biblical. It argued that the church had always been moving in this direction, that this was simply a “clarification,” a “deeper understanding” of what Armstrong had really been trying to say. The same playbook. The same con.

But this was not a clarification. This was a demolition. Armstrong had spent decades teaching that the trinity was a pagan doctrine adopted by the Roman church in the fourth century. He had written about it extensively in his final and most important book, *Mystery of the Ages*. And now, less than a decade after his death, the men sitting in his office were teaching the very doctrine he had spent his life opposing.

And while the theology was being dismantled, the literature was being destroyed. By 1990, virtually all of Armstrong’s major works had been killed: *Mystery of the Ages* — which had gone out to more

than three million people — The Incredible Human Potential, The Wonderful World Tomorrow, The Missing Dimension in Sex, The United States and Britain in Prophecy, the Good News magazine, and the 32-Lesson Ambassador College Bible Correspondence Course. The entire literature foundation was gutted before the major doctrinal announcements were made. They were burning the evidence before the congregation even knew there was a crime.

Then, in 1989, the single biggest prophetic event in decades occurred. The Berlin Wall fell. Eastern European communist governments collapsed like dominoes. For a church that had spent sixty years preaching about the prophesied resurgence of a united Europe, this was the story of a lifetime. The Plain Truth should have been all over it. Instead, Pasadena said nothing. The prophecy emphasis had already been gutted. Tkach wrote an article called “No Magic Words.” Garner Ted Armstrong, no longer in the church but watching from the outside, commented that he was excited to see what the Plain Truth would say — and couldn’t believe his eyes when the answer was silence. After a minor California earthquake, GTA quipped that it was “his father turning over in his grave.”

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The nature-of-God change was the most theologically significant of all the reversals, but it was far from the last. The dominoes kept falling.

The born-again doctrine was next. Armstrong had taught that Christians are not “born again” at the moment of conversion, as mainstream Protestants teach, but that being born again refers to the literal transformation at the resurrection — when the mortal puts on immortality and the human is literally born into the family of God as a spirit being. It was a profound and distinctive teaching, and it was directly connected to the nature-of-God doctrine. If humans were destined to be born into the God family, then the trinity —

which limits God to three persons forever — had to be wrong. Change the trinity doctrine, and the born-again doctrine had to follow. One domino knocks down the next.

Then came the Sabbath.

For sixty years, the seventh-day Sabbath had been the defining practice of the Worldwide Church of God. It was the doctrine that had started everything — the question that Loma Armstrong’s neighbor had raised in 1926, the question that had sent Herbert Armstrong to his Bible, the question that had changed the course of his life. The Sabbath was not just a teaching. It was an identity. It was the visible, weekly, unmistakable marker that separated the Worldwide Church of God from the rest of the Christian world. Every Saturday, while mainstream Christians went to Sunday services, WCG members gathered in rented halls and hotel ballrooms and school cafeterias and kept the day that God had set apart at creation.

Joe Tkach Jr. published a study paper on February 14, 1995, in which he declared that God does not tell New Covenant Christians to rest on the seventh day. The Sabbath was no longer required. It was “permitted” but not “mandatory.” Members could keep it if they wanted to, but it was not a test of fellowship — meaning that a person who worshiped on Sunday was just as much a Christian as a person who kept the Sabbath.

Think about what that meant. Think about the families who had lost jobs because they wouldn’t work on Saturday. Think about the children who had been pulled out of school activities, who had missed football games and dances and proms because they fell on Friday night or Saturday. Think about the marriages that had been strained because one spouse was in the church and the other wasn’t, and the Sabbath was the wall between them. Think about the

decades of sacrifice, the decades of being different, the decades of explaining to employers and neighbors and family members why Saturday was sacred.

And now the men in Pasadena were saying it didn't matter.

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The holy days went next. Passover, the Days of Unleavened Bread, Pentecost, the Feast of Trumpets, the Day of Atonement, the Feast of Tabernacles, the Last Great Day — the seven annual festivals of Leviticus 23 that Armstrong had taught were God's master plan revealed in advance. Members had traveled across the country every fall for the Feast of Tabernacles — eight days of services, fellowship, and celebration at designated sites around the world. It was the highlight of the church year. Families saved their second tithe all year long to finance the trip. For many members, the Feast was the most meaningful and joyful experience of their entire religious life.

No longer required.

Clean and unclean meats — the dietary laws of Leviticus 11 that members had kept for decades, avoiding pork, shellfish, catfish, and other biblically prohibited foods — no longer required.

Tithing — the three-tithe system that had funded the entire operation, that had built Ambassador College, produced *The Plain Truth*, aired *The World Tomorrow*, and financed a global ministry — no longer required. Members were encouraged to give, but the obligation was removed. Ten percent of your gross income was no longer the standard. Generosity was now between you and God.

British Israelism — the belief that the United States and Britain were descended from the lost tribes of Israel, the “key to prophecy” that

Armstrong had called essential to understanding the Bible — quietly abandoned.

The gospel of the kingdom — Armstrong’s central teaching that Jesus Christ would literally return to earth and establish a world-ruling government — reframed into a vague, spiritualized concept indistinguishable from what any Baptist or Methodist church might teach.

Mystery of the Ages — the book Armstrong had called the most important since the Bible, the book he had worked on until the final weeks of his life, the book he had intended as the capstone of fifty-two years of ministry — pulled from circulation and suppressed. The church later went to court to prevent other organizations from reprinting it, arguing that it was its “Christian duty” to keep the book out of the public’s hands.

Read that again. The church that Armstrong built went to *court* to make sure that Armstrong’s most important work would never be read again. They didn’t just disagree with the book. They actively tried to bury it.

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And then came the sermon that made it official.

On the afternoon of Saturday, December 17, 1994, Joseph W. Tkach Sr. stood before a congregation in Atlanta, Georgia, and delivered a sermon titled “Understanding the Covenants.” One week later, on December 24, 1994 — Christmas Eve — he repeated the sermon on camera at Ambassador College in Big Sandy, Texas. The videotape was then distributed to congregations around the world.

In that sermon, Tkach declared that the Worldwide Church of God was a New Covenant church. He declared that Christians were not bound by the terms of the Old Covenant. He stated explicitly that

Sabbath-keeping was no longer a test of fellowship, that the holy days were not required, that the dietary laws were not binding, and that tithing was not obligatory. He went through the entire list of distinctive doctrines that had defined the church for sixty years and, one by one, declared them optional, unnecessary, or obsolete.

It was a three-hour sermon. Three hours to demolish sixty years.

The date was not lost on some observers. December 17 through December 24 — the period of the ancient Roman festival of Saturnalia, the pagan celebration that historians acknowledge was absorbed into the Christmas holiday. The sermon that destroyed the Worldwide Church of God was delivered on the bookends of a pagan festival that the church had spent decades warning the world about.

Coincidence? Perhaps. But for those who believe in the God of the Bible, the timing was chilling.

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The reaction was immediate and devastating.

Ministers who had gone along with the incremental changes — who had swallowed the healing change, accepted the makeup reversal, tolerated the nature-of-God shift, and tried to hold their congregations together through years of confusion — now had no more room to maneuver. The Christmas Eve sermon made it impossible to pretend that the changes were minor adjustments. This was a total repudiation of everything the church had taught. There was no ambiguity left. The Pastor General had stood before the entire church and said, in plain language, that the foundational doctrines of the Worldwide Church of God were wrong.

The exodus began. In the months following the sermon, hundreds of ministers and tens of thousands of members walked out. The largest

single group formed the United Church of God in early 1995, taking approximately 15,000 members with them. Others went to the Global Church of God, which Meredith had already founded in 1993. Still others joined Gerald Flurry's Philadelphia Church of God, or David Hulme's Church of God — an International Community, or any number of smaller splinter groups that sprang up in the wake of the disaster. A *Los Angeles Times* headline captured the carnage: "Honey, I Shrunk the Church."

The numbers told the story. Church income, which had peaked at over \$200 million in 1990, plummeted to \$50 million by 1996. Membership, which had peaked at approximately 145,000, fell to fewer than 49,000 — less than a third of what it had been. *The Plain Truth*, once bigger than *Time* magazine, saw its circulation collapse. *The World Tomorrow* broadcast was canceled. Ambassador College, the crown jewel of the organization, was shut down. The beautiful Pasadena campus — the concert hall, the manicured grounds, the buildings that had been built by decades of tithes and offerings — was sold off piece by piece.

Employees were laid off by the hundreds. Buildings were sold. Programs were eliminated. The global infrastructure that had taken fifty-two years to build was liquidated in less than five.

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Joseph W. Tkach Sr. did not live to see the final result of what he had done.

In May 1995, just five months after the Christmas Eve sermon, Tkach underwent surgery to remove his gallbladder. During the procedure, surgeons discovered a grapefruit-sized tumor in his intestines and diagnosed him with colon cancer. By September, the cancer had spread to his bones. He declined radiation treatment. On September 23, 1995, Joseph W. Tkach died at the age of sixty-eight.

Before his death, he appointed his son, Joseph Tkach Jr., as his successor. The same Joe Jr. who had been the intellectual architect of the doctrinal changes from the beginning. The same Joe Jr. who had described the strategy as a “row of dominoes.” The same Joe Jr. who would later write a book called *Transformed by Truth* in which he celebrated the destruction of everything Armstrong had built and portrayed himself as a hero of the faith for having done it.

Under Joe Jr.’s leadership, the transformation was completed. In 1997, the Worldwide Church of God was accepted as a member of the National Association of Evangelicals. In 2009, the organization changed its name to Grace Communion International — erasing even the name that Armstrong had given it. The ultimate con: destroy the church from within, then change the name so nobody would even know the Worldwide Church of God ever existed. No crime scene left to investigate.

And here is the detail that proves this was not the Holy Spirit leading a church into new truth. In October 1995, Hank Hanegraaff of the Christian Research Institute — a cult-busting organization — publicly admitted that they had played “a pivotal role through closed-door meetings with WCG leaders in changing all the previous major doctrines.” Read that again. An outside Protestant organization was coaching the changes from behind closed doors. The men who were supposed to be led by God’s Spirit were being led by a cult-busting outfit that considered them a cult. That is not reformation. That is not growth. That is surrender — orchestrated in secret by men who had no business being in those rooms.

Think about that. The National Association of Evangelicals. The very kind of organization that Armstrong had spent his entire ministry warning against. The very brand of Christianity that the Worldwide Church of God had taught was part of the great deception. And now the organization that bore Armstrong’s legacy

was sitting at their table, wearing their label, speaking their language, and teaching their doctrines.

It was as if the Worldwide Church of God had never existed.

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Let's be clear about what was lost.

The members of the Worldwide Church of God had built their entire lives around a system of beliefs that they had been taught was the truth of God. They had kept the Sabbath when the world told them Sunday was fine. They had observed the holy days when the world told them Christmas and Easter were enough. They had avoided foods the Bible said were unclean when the world told them it didn't matter. They had tithed thirty percent of their income when the world told them ten percent was generous. They had homeschooled their children, turned down promotions, moved across the country, and strained family relationships — all because they believed they were obeying God.

And now the very organization that had taught them to make those sacrifices was telling them it had all been a mistake. Not just optional. A *mistake*. The doctrines were wrong. The sacrifices were unnecessary. The lifestyle they had built was based on flawed theology. Everything they had given up, everything they had suffered for, everything they had endured — it was all for nothing.

How do you process that? How do you go home after hearing that sermon and look at your family and explain that the last twenty or thirty years of their lives were built on a foundation that the church itself now says was false?

Some people couldn't. Some people broke. Marriages collapsed. Families fractured. People who had been faithful for decades walked away from God entirely — not because they had lost faith in the

Bible, but because they had lost faith in every institution that claimed to represent it. If the Worldwide Church of God could be wrong about everything, who could be trusted about anything?

The wolves didn't just devour the organization. They devoured the faith of the people inside it. And for some of those people, the faith never came back.

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But there were some who were not surprised. There were some who had seen it coming years before the Christmas Eve sermon, years before the dominoes started falling, years before the inner circle made their move.

There was at least one person who had put two articles on his kitchen table in 1988, recognized the con in real time, and started telling everyone who would listen exactly what was going to happen.

That story is the subject of the next chapter.

CHAPTER 6

The One Who Saw It

In 1987, when the new healing booklet came out, something didn't feel right.

I couldn't put my finger on it — not yet. I didn't have Armstrong's original healing booklet from the early 1980s in front of me, so I had nothing to compare Tkach's new version against. All I had was a feeling. A twitch. The same uneasy stirring I had felt as a boy sitting at the dinner table watching my stepfather work a mark. Something in the language was off. Something in the framing. Something in the way the article presented its conclusions as if they were obvious, as if anyone who questioned them was behind the curve, as if this had always been the teaching and the church was simply catching up.

I had heard that tone before. I had heard it from men who smiled when they lied.

But a feeling is not proof. And I was not the kind of man who acted on feelings. I was the kind of man who needed evidence. Two documents. Side by side. Let the words do the talking.

So I waited.

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In November 1988, two things happened that changed everything.

First, I got my hands on a copy of Herbert Armstrong’s healing booklet from the early 1980s — the one he had written specifically to refute the liberal healing doctrine that had crept in during the 1970s. This was Armstrong’s definitive, final word on the subject. And when I read it side by side with Tkach’s 1987 healing article, the heresy was undeniable.

They weren’t merely different in emphasis or in tone. They were *opposite*. Armstrong’s booklet attacked the exact position that Tkach’s article promoted. Point by point, argument by argument, the two documents contradicted each other. Armstrong said one thing. Tkach said the opposite. And Tkach had the nerve to call his version “new truth revealed by Christ” — as if Christ had changed His mind about what He had revealed to Armstrong just a few years earlier.

That was the first piece of evidence.

The second piece was the makeup articles.

In November 1988, Tkach reversed the ban on cosmetics. And that’s when I pulled out the June 22, 1987, issue of the *Worldwide News* — the one where Tkach had sworn, in black and white, that the church would *never* change the makeup doctrine.

I laid the two articles on my kitchen table. The 1987 article on the left. The 1988 article on the right. Same author. Same publication. Same subject. One said “never.” The other said “now.”

And there it was. The proof. Not a feeling. Not a suspicion. Not a rumor from headquarters. Two documents, written by the same man, saying opposite things, laid side by side on a kitchen table in the San Francisco Bay Area.

I knew exactly what I was looking at.

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Let me tell you something about myself, because it matters for understanding what happened next.

I grew up in Philadelphia. My mother married a con artist. Not a figurative con artist — an actual, professional deceiver who made his living manipulating people. I watched him operate from the time I was a small boy. I watched him set up his marks. I watched him build trust. I watched him use language as a weapon — choosing words not to communicate but to control, framing situations so that the other person never realized they were being played until it was too late.

Most people think they would recognize a con if they saw one. They wouldn't. That's what makes a con man effective. A good con artist doesn't look like a criminal. He looks like the most trustworthy person in the room. He makes you feel special. He makes you feel like he's the only one telling you the truth while everyone else is lying. And by the time you realize what's happened, he's already gone with your money, your trust, and your dignity.

I learned to see through it because I had no choice. When you live in a con artist's house, you either learn to read the signs or you get played like everyone else. I learned to read the signs. I learned to watch for the patterns — the absolute promises that were never meant to be kept, the small lies that tested the waters before the big lies came, the language of reassurance that was designed not to inform but to disarm.

And when I saw those same patterns coming from the Pastor General's office in Pasadena, I didn't need a committee to tell me what was happening.

A kid from Philadelphia who had always hated makeup recognized the con when four hundred people in his congregation didn't. Not because he was smarter. Not because he had better theology.

Because the con artist's stepson had been watching con men his whole life.

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I started talking. Immediately. I didn't wait for permission. I didn't check with a minister. I didn't form a committee or write a position paper. I started telling anyone who would listen exactly what I saw and exactly what I believed was coming.

The church was going to split. It was inevitable. The changes were not going to stop with healing and makeup — those were just the beginning. The entire doctrinal foundation was going to be dismantled, piece by piece. And when it was over, the faithful ministers and members would have no choice but to leave.

And I told them who would lead the faithful out.

Roderick C. Meredith.

I named him by name. I said Meredith would probably be the one to lead the Philadelphians — the faithful remnant, the ones who would hold fast to the truths Armstrong had taught. And I didn't stop with Meredith. I named others: Raymond McNair, Dibar Apartian, Burk McNair, Richard Ames, Gerald Waterhouse, and more. I said they would eventually leave. I said they would follow Meredith.

Every single one of them did.

This was November 1988. The Global Church of God was not founded until 1993 — five full years later. I was making these predictions half a decade before the split happened. And every name I named eventually walked out that door.

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There was one name I deliberately left off the list, and people noticed.

Herman Hoeh.

When people asked me why I didn't think Hoeh would leave, I told them: because the architect doesn't abandon his building. Hoeh had designed the government structure. He had built the intellectual framework that gave the Pastor General absolute authority. That structure was his creation. And regardless of who sat in the chair or what that person did with the power, Hoeh would stay — because leaving would mean admitting that his life's work had been turned into a weapon.

Hoeh never left. He remained with the Worldwide Church of God through every doctrinal change, through the transformation into Grace Communion International, and until his death in 2004. The architect stayed with his building, even after someone else gutted it and turned it into something unrecognizable.

It got worse. In July 1994, Hoeh preached a sermon in Fresno titled “Unfinished Business” in which he claimed that “the Word” in John 1:1 was not God and did not refer directly to Jesus Christ — it was merely a divine thought in the Father's mind. This reduced the pre-existent Christ from a divine Being to an idea. Fred Coulter of the Christian Biblical Church of God identified this as Hoeh's most damaging doctrinal move because it played directly into the Tkach administration's hands. The architect was helping the demolition crew from the inside.

And at Hoeh's funeral in 2004, Buddhist monks from the Thai community in Southern California eulogized him. Buddhist monks. The chief theologian of a church that had taught for sixty years that all other religions were pagan deceptions — honored at death by Buddhist religious leaders. This was not a casual acquaintance.

Hoeh had maintained long-standing ties with Buddhist communities in Southern California and Thailand, deep enough that they participated in his funeral. The man who had helped build the doctrinal foundation of the Worldwide Church of God had spent years cultivating relationships with practitioners of the very religions that church had warned the world about.

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I didn't just talk. I wrote.

I composed an anonymous letter to Joseph W. Tkach himself. And the method I used was deliberate, calculated, and devastatingly simple: I let the con man convict himself with his own mouth.

I took Tkach's words from the 1987 makeup article — the article where he had sworn the church would never change — and I set them against his words from the 1988 makeup reversal. I didn't add commentary. I didn't need to. The two documents, placed side by side, made the case by themselves. When a man says "never" and then does it, no further argument is necessary. The liar has already testified against himself.

This was not a technique I invented. It is the oldest method of exposing a liar in the history of God's church. It is the same method Polycrates of Ephesus used against Pope Victor in 195 AD — quoting the words and practices of the apostles themselves against a pope who had abandoned them. It is the same method the apostles used in the book of Acts: let the truth speak for itself, let the liars condemn themselves, and let the evidence do the work. You don't need to shout. You don't need to attack. You just need to put the documents on the table and let the reader decide.

Separated by eighteen hundred years, the approach was identical.

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Tkach was furious.

He responded in his Personal column in the *Worldwide News*. He didn't address the substance of the letter. He didn't explain how a man could write "never" in 1987 and then reverse himself in 1988. He didn't answer the charge. Instead, he attacked the person who had raised it. He sent ministers to the San Francisco Bay Area to see if they could find out who the "traitor" was.

When a con man is confronted with his own words, he never answers the charge. He attacks the accuser. He changes the subject. He questions the accuser's motives, his character, his loyalty. Anything to shift the focus away from the evidence and onto the person who presented it. Just about every con man does it. And Tkach did it.

The letter was anonymous. They never traced it back to me. I stayed in the Worldwide Church of God for four more years after sending that letter — watching, waiting, documenting, and telling anyone who would listen exactly what was happening.

In late 1992, I left the Worldwide Church of God voluntarily, on my own terms. I was not removed. I walked out the door because there was nothing left to stay for. Approximately one to two weeks later, the minister of the San Jose congregation announced my disfellowshipment to the congregation "with big crocodile tears." It was theater. Everybody in that congregation knew me and liked me, and the minister made a big emotional scene because he needed to change the narrative. As long as I was a respected member who had left because he saw problems, I was dangerous. But if I was a disfellowshipped person, my credibility was neutralized. That announcement came fast — within days — because they needed to change my status before others could follow my example.

I have never lost a moment's sleep over it.

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After leaving the WCG, I didn't stop. I couldn't stop. The truth doesn't stop being true just because you leave an organization.

During this time, I began meeting with a small group of people who also saw the changes for what they really were. Russ. Rob. Mike S. Martha. Like me these were just ordinary members of the Worldwide Church of God who loved the truth.

We didn't know it yet, but this small group — this handful of people who believed the evidence over the institution — would stay together through the coming years as the church split, as the splinter groups formed and fractured, and as one organization after another proved itself unworthy of the truth it claimed to represent.

But all of that was still ahead. In November 1988, I was simply a man at a kitchen table with two articles, a clear head, and a childhood that had taught me to recognize a liar.

It was enough.

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Before I left the church, before I sold my landscaping business, before I traveled to Pasadena and Texas, I began writing down what I had seen and what I believed was coming. That writing would eventually become a booklet — a booklet that predicted the split, named the players, and laid out the prophetic significance of what was happening to the Worldwide Church of God.

It was called *The Startling Prophecy of God's True Church!*

And it is the subject of the next chapter.

CHAPTER 7

The Startling Prophecy

In August 1992, I wrote a paper called *The Startling Prophecy of God's True Church!*

Forty-seven pages. Just a man who had seen the truth, studied his Bible, and written down what he believed God was showing him about what had happened, what was happening, and what was about to happen to the Worldwide Church of God.

By the time the paper was written, I had been telling people for four years what was coming. Since November 1988, I had been saying the church would split. And I listed the names of a few people — Meredith, McNair, Apartian, Neff, Ames, and Waterhouse — and predicting they would leave. I had been saying that the doctrinal changes were not going to stop, that the entire foundation would be dismantled, and that the *faithful* would eventually have no choice but to walk away.

The paper wasn't a reaction to the split — the split hadn't happened yet. Meredith was not fired from the WCG until December 10, 1992, four months *after* the paper was written. The Global Church of God did not hold its first Sabbath service until January 2, 1993, five months later. *The Startling Prophecy* was not written after the fact. It was written before the fact. It predicted what was coming, and then what it predicted came to pass.

That distinction matters. Anyone can explain a crisis after it happens. I was writing in real time, making claims that could be verified or falsified by events that had not yet occurred.

They were verified. Every one of them.

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The paper covered a range of prophetic and historical material, but there were several key elements that deserve special attention because of how precisely they were fulfilled.

The first was the seven-year cycle.

Anyone who had been in the Worldwide Church of God long enough had noticed the pattern. Major crises seemed to hit the church in seven-year intervals. In 1972, Garner Ted Armstrong was suspended for the first time, and the church entered a period of turmoil over his personal conduct. In 1979, the State of California placed the church in receivership, Armstrong began cleaning house, and some of the liberal ministers were purged. In 1986, Armstrong died and Tkach took over — and the doctrinal changes began almost immediately.

1972. 1979. 1986. Each separated by seven years. Each a seismic event in the life of the church.

My paper pointed to the next date in the cycle: 1993.

And in 1993, the church split. Meredith founded the Global Church of God. The exodus of faithful ministers and members began. The pattern held.

But I had predicted more than just the year. When I first noticed the seven-year pattern in November 1988, I told people the split would almost surely come in January of 1993 — since the previous cycle

event, Armstrong's death, had occurred in January 1986. The Global Church of God held its first Sabbath service on January 2, 1993.

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The second key element was the Zechariah 11 analysis — the prophecy of the foolish shepherd.

Zechariah 11 describes two types of shepherds. The wise shepherd carries two instruments: a staff and a rod. The staff is for guiding the flock — gently pulling them in the right direction. The rod is for protecting the flock — driving away the wolves, enforcing boundaries, keeping the sheep safe from predators and from themselves.

The foolish shepherd, according to the prophecy, abandons his rod. He looks at the rod and decides it is too harsh, too rigid, too authoritarian. He trades it for a second staff. Now he has two staffs and no rod — two instruments for gently guiding but nothing for protecting. He tries to pull the world to God through persuasion and gentleness alone, without ever confronting error, without ever standing firm, without ever using the rod to drive the wolves away.

And what is the result? Zechariah says the foolish shepherd “does not heal the sick.”

Read that again. The foolish shepherd does not heal the sick.

And what was the very first doctrine Tkach changed? The church's teaching on healing and God's role in it.

The very first domino. The very first move. The con began with healing — exactly the thing the foolish shepherd fails to do. This was not a coincidence. This was Scripture being fulfilled with a precision that should make every person in the Church of God sit up and pay attention.

But there was more. The church's own 1969 Bible Correspondence Course had taught that the Laodicean era of the church would be characterized by an involvement with medicine. The course taught that the Laodiceans, who think they are rich and have need of nothing, would turn to human solutions — including medicine — rather than trusting God. And what was the very first doctrinal change under Tkach? The liberalization of the healing doctrine and the endorsement of medicine.

The church's own material, published twenty years before it happened, predicted the very change that would signal the beginning of the Laodicean apostasy.

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And then there was the detail about the rod — the detail that sends chills down the spine of anyone who knows the history.

Roderick C. Meredith. The man whose shortened name among his wife Sheryl and his close friends was “Rod.” The man whose first name, Roderick, literally means “famous ruler.” The man who had spent decades serving as the rod of the Worldwide Church of God — the enforcer, the stabilizer, the firm hand that held the organization together when it was falling apart.

The foolish shepherd abandons his rod.

And the Worldwide Church of God literally abandoned its “Rod.” Meredith was fired on December 10, 1992. The organization cast out the very man who had been its rod for forty years. They abandoned both the instrument and the man.

Roderick. Famous ruler. The rod. Fired. Abandoned. Exactly as Zechariah said the foolish shepherd would do.

You can dismiss one of these connections as coincidence. You can dismiss two as an interesting parallel. But when the foolish shepherd abandons the rod, and the church fires the man named Rod, and the first doctrine changed is healing, and the church's own correspondence course predicted the Laodiceans would turn to medicine — at some point you have to acknowledge that God is speaking.

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The paper also laid out the prophetic context for what was happening. The Worldwide Church of God had taught that the seven churches described in Revelation 2 and 3 represented not only seven literal churches in Asia Minor but also seven successive eras of God's true church throughout history. Armstrong had identified the Worldwide Church of God as the Philadelphia era — the era of "brotherly love," the faithful church that kept God's word and did not deny His name.

But Philadelphia is followed by Laodicea — the lukewarm church. The church that is "neither hot nor cold." The church that says "I am rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing" while not knowing that it is "wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked." The church that Christ threatens to "spew out of His mouth."

The paper argued that the Worldwide Church of God under Tkach was the transition from Philadelphia to Laodicea. The faithful era was ending. The lukewarm era was beginning. And the split that was coming would separate the Philadelphians — those who held fast to the truth — from the Laodiceans — those who accepted the watered-down gospel and the comfortable lies.

That is exactly what happened.

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The paper was published in August 1992. Meredith was fired in December 1992. The Global Church of God was founded in January 1993. The Christmas Eve sermon came in December 1994. The mass exodus followed in 1995.

And while the paper was circulating, proof of the inner circle's intentions was leaking out. At the Feast of Tabernacles in 1992, a WCG member named Steve Sheppard had a four-hour conversation with Michael Feazell at Wisconsin Dells. What Feazell revealed was staggering. The Feast of Tabernacles does not picture God's plan. The church has not preached the gospel. Revelation is not prophetic — just “wild metaphor.” Anglo-Israelism is invalid. The law of God is done away — just “believe.” The church cannot trace its roots back to the first century. Feazell compared God's law to Nazi Germany, saying “there were no locks in Nazi Germany.” Sheppard took detailed notes within thirty minutes of the conversation, verified by his stepbrother Tom Damour and his wife Lori Jo. This was the executive assistant to the Pastor General, speaking candidly and with no fear — because by 1992, the inner circle already knew they had won.

Everything my paper predicted came to pass.

The church split. Meredith led the faithful out. The ministers I had named by name eventually left, every single one. The doctrinal demolition continued exactly as I had said it would. The seven-year cycle held. The foolish shepherd abandoned his rod. Healing was the first domino.

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But the story did not end with the split. If anything, the split was just the beginning of a new chapter — one that would bring its own

betrayals, its own disappointments, and its own lessons about the nature of power and the weakness of men.

Because the man who led the faithful out of the Worldwide Church of God — the man I had named as the likely leader of the Philadelphians, the man whose very name meant “famous ruler,” the man who *was* the rod — was about to build a new organization.

And in building it, he would write a wonderful booklet about church government that he would later change.

That story begins with nineteen people in a living room in Glendora, California, on the Sabbath of December 26, 1992.

And it is the subject of the next chapter.

CHAPTER 8

The Global Church of God

On December 10, 1992, Roderick C. Meredith was fired from the Worldwide Church of God.

After forty years of service — forty years of building congregations, conducting baptizing tours, enforcing discipline, holding the line during the crises of the 1970s, serving as Director of Church Administration, Deputy Chancellor of three campuses, second Vice President, Council of Elders member, and one of the five original evangelists ordained by Herbert Armstrong himself — Meredith was removed. His crime was the same as mine: he refused to go along with the doctrinal changes.

The rod had been cast out. Just as Zechariah said.

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Sixteen days later, on Sabbath, December 26, 1992, nineteen people gathered in Roderick Meredith's living room in Glendora, California, for services. It was a small group. Nineteen people. No building. No broadcast. No magazine. No staff. No budget. Just a handful of believers who had decided that they would rather follow the truth with nineteen people in a living room than follow the lie with a thousand people in the Ambassador Auditorium.

Among those nineteen were Don and Sandy Davis. Don was a faithful elder who had stood by Meredith from the beginning. He

and Sandy would prove to be pillars of the new organization in its earliest and most fragile days.

One week later, on January 2, 1993, the first official Sabbath services of the Global Church of God were held in a small rented hall in Los Angeles. Forty-two people attended. That was it. Forty-two people, a rented room, and the beginning of something that no one — except perhaps a few who had been paying attention — had seen coming.

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There was an invitation. A beautiful white invitation that was sent out to prospective attendees for those early services. I still have mine. It was simple, elegant, and it represented something that most members of the Worldwide Church of God had never imagined: an alternative. A place to go. A door that was open for those who could no longer sit in pews where the truth was being dismantled week by week.

But walking through that door was not easy. Not for most people.

You have to understand what it meant, in 1992 and 1993, to leave the Worldwide Church of God and attend services with Meredith's new group. The WCG was still the institution. It still had the name, the buildings, the broadcast, the magazine, the infrastructure. It still had the Pastor General's office. And the government structure — the structure that Hoeh had designed, that Meredith himself had enforced, and that Armstrong had made doctrine — still demanded that whoever sat in that office be obeyed.

Leaving the WCG meant defying the government. It meant breaking with the institution. It meant risking your relationships with friends and family members who stayed. It meant being labeled a rebel, a troublemaker, a follower of men rather than God. Members who left

risked being disfellowshipped — cut off from the only spiritual community most of them had ever known.

And so the early days of the Global Church of God were marked by a strange phenomenon. Some WCG members who were sympathetic to Meredith would attend the morning WCG service as usual — smiling, singing hymns, sitting in their regular seats, pretending nothing had changed — and then sneak over to the GCG afternoon service. Afraid to be seen. Afraid to be caught. Afraid to be reported to their WCG pastor. They believed the truth, but they didn't have the courage to stand for it openly.

Some of them eventually found that courage. Others didn't.

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And then there were the ministers.

Many ministers inside the WCG had been privately telling Meredith that they agreed with him. They knew the doctrinal changes were wrong. They knew the church was being destroyed from within. They told Meredith, in private conversations and in whispered phone calls, that they were ready to leave. That they would follow him. That they just needed a little more time.

They strung him along. Month after month. Year after year. Always promising, never delivering. Always one more paycheck away from doing the right thing. Always one more month of health insurance away from standing up for the truth.

What were they waiting for? They were waiting for it to be safe. They were waiting for the new organization to grow large enough to provide them with a salary before they walked away from the old one. They were not following the truth. They were following the money. And they timed their departures not according to when their

conscience demanded it but according to when their bank accounts permitted it.

When the “Christmas Eve Sermon” came in January 1995, and the mass exodus began in 1995, these same ministers finally left — many of them joining the United Church of God rather than Meredith’s Global Church of God, because the UCG offered a more comfortable structure: government by committee, no single leader, rotating positions, shared authority. It was designed to be everything the WCG had not been. And for ministers who had spent decades under top-down authority, the UCG’s collegial model was enormously attractive.

But by the time they left, the damage was done. The years of delay had cost Meredith momentum. The ministers who had promised to follow him had waited so long that when they finally moved, they moved to a different organization entirely. The cowardice of the WCG ministry didn’t just hurt Meredith — it fractured the faithful into multiple competing groups from the very beginning.

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Despite all of this, the Global Church of God grew. Slowly at first, then steadily. From 42 people on January 2, 1993, the organization expanded into hundreds and then thousands of members. Meredith launched a television broadcast and a magazine. He began holding the Feast of Tabernacles at sites around the country. He recruited ministers, established congregations, and built an infrastructure that, while modest compared to the WCG’s peak, was impressive for an organization that had started with nineteen people in a living room.

And at the center of the new organization was a promise — a published, documented, widely distributed promise about how the Global Church of God would be governed.

In 1993, Meredith published a booklet titled *Church Government and Church Unity*. It was the recruitment tool. It was the document that told prospective ministers and members: *This organization will be different. We learned the lesson. We will not repeat the mistakes of the past.*

And what Meredith wrote in that booklet was remarkable.

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Remember, this is the same Roderick Meredith who had spent decades enforcing top-down, hierarchical government in the Worldwide Church of God. The same man who had admitted, in this very booklet, that he and Herman Hoeh had formulated the church government doctrine in the early to mid-1950s. The same man who had made the government structure work through sheer force of will and personality.

And now he was writing the *opposite*.

In the 1993 booklet, Meredith argued *against* the centralized, top-down government structure that he himself had helped create. He acknowledged that the “Moses figure” comparison — the idea that the Pastor General held the same authority over the church that Moses held over Israel — had been a mistake. He embraced the language of “servant leadership.” He called for a “collegial atmosphere” in which ministers would work together as a team rather than operating under the absolute authority of one man.

“Even after several years of guiding the college [which began in 1947], Mr. Armstrong still did not understand much about Church government. Consequently, in the early to mid-1950s, Herman Hoeh and I each were inspired to write articles along this line.”

There it was. In black and white. Meredith admitting that Armstrong didn't understand church government, and that it was he and Hoeh who had formulated the doctrine. And now Meredith was saying that the doctrine they had formulated had been taken too far. That the top-down model had been weaponized. That a different approach was needed.

For the ministers and members who were considering leaving the WCG, this booklet was enormously persuasive. It acknowledged the mistakes of the past. It promised a better future. It said, in essence: *We know what went wrong. It won't happen again.*

And it worked. Ministers who had been on the fence read the booklet and came over. Members who had been afraid read the booklet and found the courage to leave. The promise of a different kind of government — servant leadership, collegiality, no more one-man rule — was exactly what thousands of shell-shocked WCG refugees needed to hear.

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The original board of directors of the Global Church of God reflected this promise. It was as small and as intimate as an organization could be: three people. Roderick Meredith. His wife, Sheryl. And elder Don Davis.

Three people. That was the board that governed the Global Church of God in its earliest days. It was lean, it was simple, and it was accountable — because there was no room for political maneuvering in a board of three. Meredith was the leader, Sheryl was his partner, and Don was the faithful elder who had been there from the first Sabbath in the living room.

If the board had stayed at three, the history of the Global Church of God might have been very different. But it didn't stay at three.

Because Meredith, having promised a collegial atmosphere and servant leadership, now felt obligated to expand the board. To bring in more voices. To demonstrate that the Global Church of God was truly different from the WCG's one-man rule. And so the board grew. New members were added: Larry Salyer. Raymond McNair — who was married to Meredith's sister, making the eventual betrayal a family affair. Edwin Pope. Carl McNair. Colin Adair.

Meredith later called this expansion a “serious, though innocent, mistake.” He was right about the serious part. He was wrong about the innocent part. Because the expanded board was the weapon that would be used to destroy him. After Colin Adair died, the conspirators — Raymond McNair, Salyer, and Pope — voted three to one to remove Carl McNair from the board, since Carl could not vote on his own removal. They then installed a lawyer named Norbert Link in Carl's seat, giving them a four-to-one majority. With that majority, they had the votes to fire Meredith from the organization he had founded. It was a classic coup, executed with the precision of men who had been planning it for years.

And in all likelihood, it was Salyer himself who orchestrated the board expansion from the beginning — using the very language of “collegial atmosphere” and “servant leadership” that Meredith had been championing to convince Meredith to dismantle his own protection.

Meredith opened the door. Salyer walked through it.

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But that betrayal was still years away. In 1993, 1994, and 1995, the Global Church of God was growing, the faithful were gathering, and for a brief, hopeful moment, it looked like God's people might actually get it right this time.

They didn't. Because men are men. And the same pattern that had destroyed the Worldwide Church of God was already at work in the organization that had been founded to escape it.

The 1993 booklet promised servant leadership. The 1993 booklet promised a collegial atmosphere. The 1993 booklet promised that the mistakes of the past would not be repeated.

Within six years, every one of those promises would be broken.

And the man who broke them would not be Larry Salyer. It would be Roderick Meredith himself.

But first, Salyer would have his turn.

And that is the subject of Chapter 10. Before we get there, I need to tell you about my visits to Glendora — because what happened between Meredith and me during those years reveals something important about how God works and about the difference between holding an office and holding the truth.

That is the subject of the next chapter.

CHAPTER 9

Visiting Meredith

Most people assumed I drove to Glendora to learn from Rod Meredith.

It was a reasonable assumption. Meredith was one of the original evangelists of the Worldwide Church of God. He had been personally trained by Herbert Armstrong. He had helped formulate the very doctrine of church government that held the entire organization together. He had served for nearly forty years. He was a powerful speaker, a gifted writer, and a man who commanded respect wherever he went.

And I was a landscaper from San Jose.

So when people heard that Russ and I were making trips down to Glendora to visit Meredith and his wife Sheryl, they naturally assumed we were going to sit at the feet of the master. To be taught. To be mentored. To absorb whatever wisdom the great man had to offer.

They were wrong.

I did not go to Glendora to have Rod Meredith teach me. I went to Glendora to share with him what God had shown me — insights that Meredith, for all his decades of experience and study, had not yet seen.

Let me be very clear about something before I go any further. What I just said is not a criticism of Rod Meredith. Not even close. God called Meredith to do a very important job, and although he did not do it perfectly, he still did a very good job. He was a stabilizing force in the church during turbulent times. He was courageous enough to walk away from the Worldwide Church of God when most ministers were too afraid to move. He built the Global Church of God from nineteen people in a living room to a functioning, worldwide organization. That took guts, leadership, and faith.

But seeing through deception was not what God called Rod Meredith for.

God gave me the ability to see through the deception at the very start.

My relationship with Meredith had started years earlier, long before the Global Church of God existed. During a trip in the spring of 1989 to Big Sandy, Texas, where Meredith was the provost of the Ambassador College campus, I walked into his office and asked to see him. The secretary set an appointment for the next day. I could not believe it. I was going to sit across the desk from one of the most powerful men in the entire Worldwide Church of God.

The meeting was for the next day. Meredith had no idea why I was there. He figured I must be an old student of his just stopping by to say hello since I would be in the area for a few days. So the secretary called Meredith, and he came out of his office to greet me personally, then escorted me inside. We both sat down and he said casually, "So what brings you here today, Mike?"

The first thing I did was pull out a long sheet of paper with all of my questions written down. When he saw that, he was in shock. But he graciously let me proceed.

I started with easy questions — softballs — and then slowly worked toward the more serious, pointed ones. The whole time I was reading his body language, constantly gauging whether I was going too far or whether I could continue.

He was definitely guarded and did not want to say much, even when he seemed to agree with what I was bringing up. But the whole reason I was there was not to warn him or share information. It was to test him. To see what kind of man he really was. To see how he reacted to controversial things thrown his way. The Bible tells us to test the spirits to see if they are from God. That is exactly what I was doing. I was testing his spirit.

The verdict was yes and no. No, because he had no idea where the church was headed or how serious things had become. He actually liked the new makeup policy — but just like all the other ministers, he had no idea that it was the exact opposite of what Tkach had written the previous year. And that was a huge red flag. He was completely in the dark. I was years ahead of him. Back in San Jose I was already telling everyone a split was coming and that it would almost surely be Meredith leading the charge. But the man himself had no clue.

But yes, because underneath all that caution, I could see the raw material. He had convictions. He had a line he would not cross. He just had not been pushed to it yet. I could see that when the moment came, he would eventually wake up and — in the words of his wife — grow a pair. And what I found was a man who was not ready yet but who would be when God pushed him there.

Russ was right there at Big Sandy because he was a student. He knew I had set up the meeting that day and he could not wait for the verdict. And when I told him, he was ecstatic, because he really liked Meredith. That was a great moment between the two of us.

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Back in San Jose, Russ eventually returned from Big Sandy. And now a pattern began that would last for years. Russ and I started regularly driving from San Jose down to the Pasadena area so that I could talk with Rod Meredith in person, as he was no longer living in Big Sandy, Texas.

Now, I need to set something straight, because people got this wrong for years — and even Meredith himself got it wrong. Whenever people heard that I had been driving down to see Meredith all those times, they would always say the same thing: “So you went down to see RCM for guidance on what was happening to the Worldwide Church of God.” And even Meredith, when he would retell the story, would always say that I was coming to see him for counseling about the situation.

But that is NOT what happened. Not at all. I went to see Meredith to help him. To guide him. To counsel him. He did not help me. I helped and taught him. I had known what was happening since the fall of 1988 — over four years before Meredith was finally pushed out the door. I had sent the anonymous letter. I had tested the man at Big Sandy. I had written the paper that would end up on his kitchen table. I was years ahead of him. Every single time I drove south, I was the one bringing the information, the analysis, and the urgency. He was the one who needed to hear it.

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In August of 1992, I sat down and wrote a forty-seven-page paper I titled “The Startling Prophecy of God’s True Church.” In it, I laid out exactly what was going to happen: where the church was headed, when the split would likely occur, and how God would probably use Rod Meredith to lead the faithful remnant. I named names — Meredith, McNair, Apartian, Neff, Ames, Waterhouse, and others — by name. I predicted who would leave the Worldwide Church, and I predicted who would stay.

I shared it with Russ, who was now back from Big Sandy. I shared it with Martha and the rest of the group. And eventually, a copy of that paper would end up on the one table where it could change everything.

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That fall, Russ and I went to the same Feast of Tabernacles location as the Merediths, which was in Palm Springs, California. We were hoping for a chance to really talk with Meredith, but all week he was surrounded by old friends, fellow ministers, and former students. We could not get close. The clock was ticking.

Then the opening appeared. Rod and his wife wanted Russ and me to watch their two sons one evening while they went out alone. We had been waiting the whole time for exactly this kind of moment.

They came back much later than expected. Meredith apologized and said it was getting too late to talk. Why don’t you come see us in Glendale sometime? I said of course, and then as casually as I could manage, I mentioned on my way out the door: “Oh, by the way, I left a little paper on the kitchen table.”

Meredith stopped me. “Paper? What kind of paper? A small paper you say?” He walked over to the kitchen table and picked it up. His

expression changed when he saw it was about fifty pages. He read the title: “The Startling Prophecy of God’s True Church.” He said the Feast was ending tomorrow and he would never have time to read it. But he said he would try his best when he returned to Glendale.

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The next day at services, Russ came sprinting up to me, full of excitement: “Rod Meredith read your paper!” Then he told me that the Merediths wanted us to join them for lunch — and we were the only ones invited. So Russ and I drove to the restaurant, probably a Mexican restaurant because Rod Meredith always went to a Mexican restaurant. I think he liked both the food and the prices. During the whole drive Russ and I were so nervous. Was he going to give me a harsh stern lecture? But when we sat down, midway through the lunch, Meredith looked me in the eye and informed me that he had read my paper, and that it was well written and well thought out. And that I had a knack for writing.

A few weeks later, Russ and I drove down to Glendale again. Same scene — another Mexican restaurant. And Meredith repeated the same things that he had told me in Palm Springs, that my paper was well written, well thought out, and that I had a knack for writing.

But this time Meredith added six words I will never forget: **“AND IT HELPED ME A LOT.”**

A week or two after that, I went back down alone this time and stayed at the Merediths’ home for the weekend. His wife baked cookies for my drive home. That woman had fire in her. She was the one who told Rod he needed to grow a pair and confront Tkach head on. Between my paper and his wife’s words, the man did not stand a chance of staying put.

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By this time I had grown tired of waiting for Meredith to finally leave the Worldwide Church of God and do something. I had been telling people since 1988 that a split was coming and that Meredith would lead it. It was now late 1992 —four years later — and he still had not moved. So I made my decision independently, without knowing what was about to happen to Meredith: I was just going to walk away. On my own. With or without him.

On my second-to-last Sabbath with the Worldwide Church of God, I told all my close friends that the following week would be my very last time. I was done.

And then that final Sabbath came. I went to the San Jose service, and that is when they made the announcement: Rod Meredith had been blackballed. He was out. I found out later that Meredith had not decided to leave until two days before that particular Sabbath. That Thursday he had met with Joe Tkack Sr. (or perhaps Joe Junior and Mike Fezell as I can't remember who exactly he met with). Meredith was pushed out as a result of that meeting.

But I had already made my decision before that Thursday. I was already walking out the door on my own when God arranged it so that Meredith got pushed out at the exact same time. I was ahead of Rod Meredith himself. The man I predicted would lead the split — I beat him out the door.

That evening, the Oakland congregation was having a party. I went. And the moment I walked in, something happened that caught me completely off guard. Several people — people I had completely forgotten I had ever spoken to about any of this — came rushing over to me. Not walking. Rushing. Their eyes were wide.

“How did you know this?!” they cried out. “You told us a year or two ago this would happen and we thought you were crazy! And yet it happened. Meredith is no longer in the Worldwide Church of God!”

These were not Russ, Rob, Mike S., and Martha. My inner circle already knew. These were other people — casual conversations from a year or two earlier that I did not even remember having. I had planted seeds and forgotten about them. But they did not forget. They had thought I was out of my mind at the time. And the moment it happened, every word I had told them came flooding back, and they made a beeline for me at that party.

The one person I remember the most from that evening was a girl named Josefa. She was so convinced by what she had witnessed — that I had called it years in advance — that she left the Worldwide Church of God and joined the Global Church of God right along with me.

That was my last night as a member of the Worldwide Church of God. And God gave me one final confirmation on the way out the door.

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Shortly after that, the new yes-man minister made it official. I was “marked” and disfellowshipped from the congregation. I am proud of the fact that I was the first person disfellowshipped in the entire northern California area. The first one. While thousands of members sat quietly and accepted whatever they were told, I was the one who stood up and said, “This man is a fraud, and here is the proof.”

I was told that when the new minister stood before the congregation to announce my disfellowshippment, he was soaking wet with crocodile tears. A real performance. The con goes on.

But it did not matter. By then I was already gone. They did not throw me out — I had already left. They just made it official after the fact.

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I made multiple trips to Glendora during those years of 1990-1992.

During one of those lunches, Rod and I talked about running. It turned out that we had both competed in the mile in high school. Meredith had run a 4:23 around 1949 — an elite time that could have earned him a track scholarship. I had run a 4:39 in high school with severe asthma and barely able to train. And Herbert Armstrong himself had been a miler, running approximately 5:00 around 1913, when the world record was only about 4:14.

And each time, the pattern was the same: I was NOT there to sit at Meredith's feet. I was there to open his eyes to what God had shown me. Insights about the deception. About the patterns. About where the church was headed and why. About things that a man who had spent his entire adult life inside the organization could not see precisely because he had spent his entire adult life inside the organization.

Rod Meredith was too close to the machinery to see how the machinery worked. He had helped build the engine. He knew every piston, every valve, every gear. But he could not step back far enough to see that the engine had been hijacked. That required a different set of eyes. Eyes trained not in theology, but in the art of deception.

That is why he needed me. Not to tell him what to believe. Not to lecture him on doctrine. But to show him what was happening right in front of him that he could not see because he had been inside the house his whole life and had never once walked outside to look at it from the street.

Looking back now, I can see what God was doing with these Glendora visits. He was using me to help one of His most important servants see the truth. God did not waste those five years I spent watching Cipriano deceive people. He did not waste the instincts I developed as a child, reading faces and body language and detecting lies before the liar even finished speaking. He took every painful lesson from my childhood and turned it into a weapon for His purposes.

Meredith had the position, the education, the ordination, and the title. I had none of those things. But I had something Meredith did not have and could not have: the training that only comes from being raised by a professional con artist. And when the biggest con in the history of the Worldwide Church of God was being run, God made sure that the one person in the entire church who had been trained to recognize it was paying attention.

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Rod Meredith would go on to build the Global Church of God and later the Living Church of God. He would lead thousands of people. He would write dozens of booklets and give hundreds of sermons. And within a few short years, Larry Salyer would have his turn.

That is the subject of Chapter 10.

CHAPTER 10

The Salyer Coup

Rod Meredith left the Worldwide Church of God. But the Worldwide Church of God never left Rod Meredith.

He carried it with him. The favoritism toward Ambassador College graduates. The hierarchical instincts. The old boys' network. The belief that the right credentials mattered more than the right character. He started a new organization, but he built it with the same blueprint that had already failed once. And that blueprint was about to fail again.

The first warning sign appeared in my own backyard.

I had built our small Bay Area group from nothing. I was the host. I ran everything. I had been one of the original forty-two people at the inaugural GCG service in January 1993. My paper had ended up on Meredith's kitchen table. I had driven to Glendora multiple times to share insights with the man who was now leading the organization. And when a local minister named Jack Hendren joined our group, Meredith immediately put him in charge.

Just like that. I was pushed aside for a Johnny-come-lately with an Ambassador College pedigree.

And Hendren's first move? He put his own twenty-five-year-old son-in-law second in command. A young man who did not seem to be converted at all. Nepotism, plain and simple. The same disease that had infected the Worldwide Church of God was already metastasizing in the Global Church of God.

I did not say a word. I watched. I observed. I took notes. I waited for the pattern to reveal itself.

The pattern did not take long.

As the Global Church of God grew, Meredith made what he would later call a “serious, though innocent, mistake.” He expanded the board of directors.

The original board had been just three people: Meredith, his wife Sheryl, and faithful elder Don Davis. Three people. Simple. Safe. The man who built the church, his wife, and his most trusted friend. Nobody could outvote them. Nobody could stage a takeover. The structure was small enough to protect itself.

But Meredith was championing “servant leadership” and a “collegial atmosphere” in his 1993 booklet. He was arguing against the very centralized government he had helped create in the Worldwide Church. And in the spirit of that new philosophy, he opened the board to others: Raymond McNair, Larry Salyer, Edwin Pope, Carl McNair, and Colin Adair.

He dismantled his own protection.

Larry Salyer was the most dangerous addition.

Salyer had been a major player in the Worldwide Church of God during the very years the changes were being implemented. He was part of the machine. Then he showed up late to the Global Church of God — a Johnny-come-lately — and Meredith put him on the board immediately. Why? Because Salyer was well known, well liked, and had that salesman quality that could draw people out of the WWCG and into the GCG. Meredith wanted growth. Salyer could deliver it.

I spotted him immediately. One Sabbath, Salyer came to the Bay Area and right away started teaching something noticeably different from what we had been taught. I was furious and went straight to him about it. He was gracious, pleasant, charming — the expert salesman that everyone loves initially. He told me it was just a very small point and that if I did not like it, he would never mention it again when he was in the Bay Area.

That response told me everything I needed to know. A genuine teacher stands by what he believes and discusses it openly. A salesman reads the room and adjusts his pitch based on the audience. Salyer read the room and backed right down. Not because he changed his mind, but because that is what salesmen do when they meet resistance. They come back later through a different door.

And his good friend Jack Hendren was already running my Bay Area group. Salyer on the board. Hendren in the local congregation. The WCG insiders were quietly positioning themselves throughout the Global Church of God.

On November 20, 1998, Larry Salyer made his move.

The death of Colin Adair had already reduced the board. Salyer had recruited Raymond McNair and Edwin Pope to his side. That gave him three votes.

Then they pulled a crooked procedural maneuver. A motion was made to remove Carl McNair from the board. No charges of misconduct. No accusations of wrongdoing. Just a vote to remove him. And since the motion involved Carl McNair, he could not participate in the vote on his own removal. That left four people voting: Salyer, Raymond McNair, and Edwin Pope on one side. Meredith on the other.

Three to one. Carl McNair was off the board.

In his place they installed Norbert Link, a lawyer. Total control. The coup was complete.

Now pause and consider the depth of the betrayal that just occurred.

Raymond McNair voted his own brother Carl off the board. His own flesh and blood. Then Raymond helped fire Rod Meredith from the organization Meredith had built from nothing. But Raymond was also married to Meredith's sister. That means in a single board meeting, Raymond McNair betrayed his own brother and his own wife's brother. Family on both sides. Stabbed in the back on both sides. For Larry Salyer.

And then came the final blow.

When Meredith left the Worldwide Church of God in 1992, the WCG kept everything he had ever written for them. Decades of booklets, articles, Bible studies, correspondence courses — all of it belonged to the organization. Meredith had to start over from nothing, rewriting every piece of literature from scratch.

Now it happened again. The Global Church of God owned the copyrights to everything Meredith had rewritten. When Salyer and the board took over the GCG, they took the copyrights with it. Every booklet, every article, every piece of content that Meredith had painstakingly recreated — stolen for the second time by people who had contributed almost nothing to creating it.

Rod Meredith had been robbed of his own written work twice.

The aftermath unfolded predictably.

Jack Hendren, Salyer's man in the Bay Area, stayed loyal to the coup and took my group with him. The congregation I had built, hosted, and run from the beginning — gone. Hendren walked away with it the same way Salyer walked away with the copyrights.

But not everyone followed Hendren. Four people stayed with me. The same four people who had stayed with me through every split, every crisis, every upheaval since the underground study group days in the WCG: Russ, Rob, Mike S, and Martha. The original crew. They had been with me when Tkach's headquarters was hunting for the "traitor" in the Bay Area. They stayed with me when Meredith started the GCG. And they stayed with me now.

The Global Church of God went belly up. Larry Salyer and Edwin Pope joined the United Church of God — another splinter group, another organization, another paycheck. They had never cared about the GCG. They had used it the way con men use marks: get in, take what you can, move on to the next one.

And Raymond McNair? The man who had betrayed both his brother and his brother-in-law in the same board meeting? He came crawling back to Rod Meredith.

And Meredith took him back.

I want the reader to stop here and see what just happened, because if you do not see the pattern, you will miss the entire point of this book.

The Worldwide Church of God was built by Herbert Armstrong. Insiders took it over and destroyed it from within. The copyrights stayed with the destroyers.

The Global Church of God was built by Rod Meredith. Insiders took it over and destroyed it from within. The copyrights stayed with the destroyers.

Same pattern. Same result. Different decade.

And it was about to happen one more time — not through a hostile coup, but through something more subtle. Rod Meredith was about

to rebuild everything from scratch for the third time. He would call it the Living Church of God. And this time, it would be Meredith himself who would pull a 180.

That is the subject of the next chapter.

CHAPTER 11

The Living Church of God

The first thing I noticed was the name. The *Living Church of God*.

In Revelation 3:1, Christ sends a message to the church in Sardis: “*You have a name that you are alive, but you are dead.*”

Alive. Living. Of all the names Rod Meredith could have chosen for his second organization, he chose the one word that Scripture uses to describe a dead church pretending to be alive. He was completely oblivious to the connection. I was not.

But I followed him anyway. After the Salyer coup destroyed the Global Church of God, most of the members went with Meredith to the LCG. The original four — Russ, Rob, Mike S, and Martha — came with me. Don Davis and his wife Sandy, faithful as always, stood with Meredith again. And the whole cycle started over for the second time.

The aftermath of the coup played out exactly as you would expect.

The Global Church of God went belly up. Without Meredith, there was nothing to hold it together. Salyer and Edwin Pope slithered into the United Church of God — another splinter group, another organization, another paycheck. They had never cared about the GCG. It was just a vehicle. When the vehicle stopped running, they found a new ride.

And Raymond McNair? The man who had betrayed his own brother Carl and his own wife's brother Rod in the same board meeting? He came crawling back to Meredith. And Meredith took him back. Because that is who Rod Meredith was. A man who genuinely believed in forgiveness and second chances — even when the person asking for forgiveness had shown no evidence of deserving one.

Meredith started from scratch again. New organization. New letterhead. New booklets — because once again, the copyrights to everything he had written belonged to the organization that had stolen it from him. For the third time in his life, Rod Meredith sat down at a desk and began rewriting literature he had already written twice before.

And this time, with Don Davis and company beside him, the Living Church of God grew quickly. The television program came back. The magazine came back. The congregations multiplied. Within a few years, the LCG was a functioning worldwide organization with thousands of members, a headquarters in Charlotte, North Carolina, and a staff that included ministers, evangelists, and administrators.

It also included an awful lot of relatives.

The LCG was turning into a family business. Meredith's children. The McNairs. The Winnails. John Ogwyn's family. Jeff Fall's family. If you wanted a job at headquarters or a position in the ministry, you had better be related to someone important or hold an Ambassador College degree. Preferably both.

It was the same closed system that had corrupted the Worldwide Church of God. The same old boys' network with a new name on the door. Rod Meredith had left the WWCG, but he had never left the WCG's way of doing things.

Then came the moment that really disappointed me.

Meredith rewrote the church government booklet.

Not just revised it. Not just updated it. He rewrote it to say almost the exact opposite of what the 1993 version had said. The 1993 booklet had argued against centralized, top-down government. Meredith had admitted that he and Herman Hoeh had formulated the old government structure. He had called the “Moses figure” comparison a mistake. He had championed “servant leadership” and a “collegial atmosphere.” That booklet had been his recruitment tool — the document that convinced thousands of WCG members that the GCG would be different.

Now, with the LCG big enough to need controlling, Meredith resurrected the very system he had specifically condemned. Back to top-down hierarchical government with himself at the top. Back to unquestioned authority flowing from headquarters. The man who had admitted the old system was a mistake now reimposed that same system when it served his purposes again.

I was very upset. I could not believe what I had read. Rod Meredith was such a gifted writer and so convincing that he could persuade you one way years ago and then persuade you of the opposite years later. He rewrote church government to recruit people out. Then he rewrote it again to keep people in. And he probably justified it to himself every step of the way.

I believe his intentions were genuinely good. But as the old saying goes, the road to hell is paved with good intentions.

And here is the part that should stop every Church of God member in his tracks. Meredith was not the first leader to reverse himself on church government. Herbert Armstrong did it first. In February 1939, Armstrong published an article in the Good News of the

Kingdom titled “Did Christ Reorganize the Church?” In it, Armstrong wrote that all authority and power to rule is limited solely to each local congregation, and that there is no Bible authority for any super-government or organization with authority over the local congregations. He called centralized church government Babylonian, from Rome, and “the image to the beast.” He wrote that organization and church government has brought nothing but strife, jealousies, divisions, and bitterness, and that it is not of God and can bear no other fruit. Then by the 1950s, Armstrong reversed himself completely and installed the very system he had called an abomination. And Meredith, who helped build Armstrong’s centralized system in the 1950s, condemned it in 1993, and then reimposed it when the LCG grew large enough to need controlling, was simply repeating the same cycle his mentor had started.

On top of the government reversal, the financial demands were crushing.

First tithe. Second tithe. Third tithe. Freewill offerings “above and beyond all three tithes.” And mandatory holy day offerings seven times a year. The LCG was not just asking for generosity. It was commanding a financial system that consumed a staggering percentage of every member’s income. And the ministers enforced it with the same certainty they brought to every other doctrine — as if God Himself had handed down a tax code.

I had already come to believe, through years of careful study, that the entire tithing doctrine as taught by the Worldwide Church and all its splinter groups was a misapplication of Old Testament law that had no basis in the New Testament. I would later write a detailed booklet explaining exactly why. But for now, the point is this: the financial machinery of the LCG was grinding people down, and nobody at headquarters seemed to notice or care.

Somewhere around 2000, we got our own minister: Jeff Fall, a retired dentist.

For the most part, Jeff Fall was a fine man. He had an exemplary family — a wonderful wife and children who were a joy to be around. I always considered his family the best family I had ever witnessed in any of these organizations. So even though I would eventually disagree with Jeff Fall on important matters, no one could ever disagree with how he raised his family. They were simply amazing.

Fall was responsible for our Bay Area group and other congregations stretching as far as Sacramento. He could only be with us in person once every two or three weeks. So he needed someone to run things when he was not there.

He chose Richard.

Richard was a novice. He had only recently come into the LCG through the television program. He had no depth of biblical knowledge, no years of experience in the faith, no track record of discernment or spiritual maturity. But Richard had one remarkable talent: he could quote Rod Meredith chapter and verse. Not the Bible — Meredith. It was always “Mr. Meredith said this” and “Mr. Meredith said that.” I never once heard Richard quote Scripture or discuss the Bible in any meaningful way. His faith was not in God. It was in a man.

So Richard was put in charge.

I actually welcomed it. I had a little chuckle over it, if I am being honest. By that point, I had had enough of the nonsense and it was time for me to move ahead — alone if need be. Richard replacing me was just the final nudge God used to make the exit easy.

I had also started writing my own booklets: True Church History, False Church History, Revelation Comes Alive, and others. I did not hide the fact that I was writing, and the LCG did not like it one bit. In their system, everything had to come from headquarters. A regular member writing his own biblical material was an act of rebellion, not an act of faith.

Jeff Fall called me repeatedly, trying to talk me out of leaving. I told him this was not impulsive. I had been thinking about it for years. The rewritten government booklet. The tithing demands. The nepotism. The Ambassador College favoritism. The headquarters-only approach to truth. Richard being put over me as the final, almost comical, confirmation. None of this was new. It had been building for a long time.

I left the Living Church of God. Russ and Martha came with me. And for the first time since I had joined the Worldwide Church of God in 1984, I was no longer under anyone's organizational authority. No headquarters. No minister. No board of directors. No tithing records being used to measure my faithfulness.

Just me, a Bible, and the God who had trained the con artist's stepson to see what everyone else had refused to see.

It was one of the most liberating days of my spiritual life.

CHAPTER 12

Jules Dervaes and Gerald Flurry

I was not the only one who saw it early.

Starting on December 1, 1986 — less than a year after Armstrong’s death — Jules Dervaes began writing a series of seven letters collectively called *Letter to Laodicea*. He sent them to Joseph Tkach Sr. by registered mail, certified, return receipt requested. He then sent copies to what he believed was every evangelist in the Worldwide Church of God, both domestic and overseas. The seven letters were published in stages from December 1986 through January 1988.

Those seven letters contained the heart and core of what would later appear in a very different book under a very different name. The primary themes were the Laodicean era, the identification of Armstrong as Zerubbabel and Tkach as Joshua, and the concept of the “Man of Sin.” All of it written and distributed by Jules Dervaes years before anyone else published similar material.

Dervaes even took out a newspaper advertisement on April 30, 1989, in the Tyler, Texas, Telegraph summarizing his seven letters. He was not hiding. He was not whispering in corners. He put his name on it, paid for it, and sent it into the world for anyone to read.

Remember that date: April 30, 1989. It matters for what comes next.

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Gerald Flurry was a minister in the Worldwide Church of God, pastoring the Oklahoma City and Enid congregations. He was fired

from the WCG on December 7, 1989, and immediately founded the Philadelphia Church of God in Edmond, Oklahoma.

Flurry's flagship work was a book called *Malachi's Message to God's Church Today*. He claimed the content of that book was revealed to him directly by "a mighty angel from God." Not inspired by study. Not developed through years of careful research. Revealed. By an angel. Flurry claimed divine revelation as the source of his material.

There was one problem with that claim.

The primary themes of *Malachi's Message* — the Laodicean era, the Zerubbabel and Joshua identification, the Man of Sin concept — had already been written and distributed by Jules Dervaes in his seven *Letter to Laodicea* letters, which had been mailed by certified mail to Tkach and to every evangelist in the WCG, starting in December 1986. Dervaes' material predated Flurry's claimed "revelation" by almost two years.

The letters had been circulating among the WCG ministry. The newspaper ad had been published in Texas. The ideas were in the air. And then Gerald Flurry published a book containing the same core ideas and told the world that a mighty angel had given them directly to him.

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Dervaes knew exactly what had happened.

On September 26, 1990, after Flurry published *Malachi's Message*, Dervaes sent Flurry a certified letter — signed for by Barbara Flurry, Gerald's wife — directly accusing him of plagiarism. The letter stated that many of Flurry's ideas were "a direct and clear plagiarism" of his work. He warned Flurry to settle the matter according to Matthew 5:25–26: "Agree with your adversary quickly,

while you are on the way with him, lest your adversary deliver you to the judge.”

Flurry never responded. He never acknowledged the letter. He never addressed the accusation. He simply ignored the man whose work he had taken and continued building an empire on the foundation of another man’s ideas — ideas he told the world had come from a mighty angel.

Someone later did a side-by-side comparison of *Letter to Laodicea* and *Malachi’s Message*. The parallels were unmistakable.

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I read *Malachi’s Message*. I read it very carefully. And I can tell you that it was a joke. Not close to being biblically sound. It was riddled with errors from beginning to end. Flurry elevated Armstrong to a status that bordered on idolatry and then elevated himself to the same level — God’s chosen successor, the one man through whom all truth now flowed. The members of his church worship him the way many people worshipped Armstrong. Same cage. Same chair. Different man sitting in it.

Flurry built the exact same system that Herman Hoeh had designed in the 1950s — centralized government, unquestioned authority, absolute obedience to the man at the top — and installed himself in the seat of power. His members cannot even attend services until they have read his book and agreed with it. They are cut off from family members who leave. They are monitored for loyalty — not to God, not to Scripture, but to Gerald Flurry personally.

He has written over sixty books, all reinforcing his own authority. He built a college. He launched a television program. He accumulated thousands of members. And the entire empire was built on the foundation of ideas that another man had written first, mailed

by certified letter, published in a newspaper, and distributed to every evangelist in the Worldwide Church of God — years before Flurry’s “mighty angel” supposedly showed up.

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Jules Dervaes died on December 27, 2016, in Pasadena, at the age of sixty-nine, from a pulmonary embolism. He was cremated. He and his family had worshipped alone as independent Sabbath keepers from 1986 until his death — thirty years.

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That is not just the story of Jules Dervaes and Gerald Flurry. That is the story of the Worldwide Church of God. That is the story of the early church. That is the story of two thousand years of God’s people being deceived, scattered, and silenced by men who cared more about power than truth.

And it is the same story that Revelation 2:24–25 warned about: *“Deeper truths, as they call them — depths of Satan, actually.”*

Gerald Flurry called his stolen material a revelation from a mighty angel. Tkach called his doctrinal demolition “new truth” and “deeper understanding.” Different men, same language. The language of the depths of Satan.

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CHAPTER 13

The Small Flock Scatters

When I left the Living Church of God, Russ and Martha came with me. For the first time since 1984, the three of us were free. No headquarters. No minister. No board of directors. No tithing records measuring our faithfulness. Just a small group of believers meeting on the Sabbath at Martha's house, somewhere between Russ's place and mine, studying the Bible and fellowshiping the way God's people were always meant to.

It was peaceful. It was simple. And it did not last.

Rob had already drifted away before we left the LCG, around 2002. He was a great person — genuinely humble, not dishonest in the slightest. And he had a gift that was almost supernatural: Rob could quote Scripture instantly, from memory, as if he had a photographic recall of the entire Bible. You could name a topic and he would rattle off verse after verse without hesitation.

But memorizing the Bible and understanding the Bible are two very different things. Having all the puzzle pieces does not mean you know where they go. And Rob became overconfident in his own ability to figure it out. He started going down wrong paths, arriving at conclusions that were not biblically sound. I tried to show him where he was wrong, but by that point he had too much confidence in his own reasoning to consider what anyone else had to say. He went his own way, and I have not seen him since.

Mike S left around the same time. He was tall, dark, and handsome — the kind of man women always notice. But far more important than his appearance, he was a genuinely humble person whom I liked very much. The problem was simple: Mike wanted to marry and settle down, and there was almost no chance of that happening in the tiny Living Church of God. The pool was too small. So he made a choice. He chose a wife over the calling. I understood it, even though it was sad to watch him go. I have not heard from him since.

Josefa got swept into strange theological teachings. I never fully understood what pulled her away, but one day she was with us and the next she was pursuing doctrines that had no biblical foundation. I sometimes run into her, but the Josefa I knew — the one who had been part of our underground study group during the Tkach years — is gone.

And then there was Russ.

Of all the losses, Russ was the hardest. He had been with me from the beginning. He was a student at Big Sandy when I first started connecting the dots about Tkach. He drove down to Glendora with me to visit Meredith. He sat in my living room during those secret meetings when headquarters was hunting for the “traitor.” He followed me through the WCG, the GCG, the LCG, and out the other side. Russ was the last man standing from the original group.

The trouble started with the calendar.

I had shown Russ a simple, devastating proof that the Jewish calendar with its postponement rules was wrong. The biggest problem was straightforward: under the postponement rules, you can never have a holy day on a Friday. And yet in the New

Testament, there was a holy day on a Friday. Case closed. That is all anyone really needs to know. It is the same method I used with Tkach — one contradiction is all you need.

Russ accepted the proof. But instead of moving on, he dove headfirst into the deep end and never came back up. If the Jewish calendar was wrong, then which calendar was right? And Russ was going to find out. He started reading the Talmud, historical documents, rabbinical commentaries — on and on it went. Every single Sabbath at Martha's house, all Russ wanted to talk about was the calendar. Week after week after week, for a year or longer. Martha and I stopped wanting to hear about it. But Russ could not let go.

And Russ had a way about him. He was aggressive in conversation, and when you disagreed with him on something, he could not understand how that was possible. He would re-explain the whole thing in a slightly different way, thinking you would get it this time. And then a third time, a fourth time, a fifth time. It was exhausting.

Eventually, Russ decided he needed new people to share his calendar research with. He started looking into Seventh-day Adventist groups, Jewish-based “Christian” groups, and Messianic congregations. He became absolutely infatuated with the Hebrew Roots movement. The switch was pulled and he did not even realize it. This led to him meeting a very pretty divorced woman with two teenagers and marrying her. The kids were great, but the marriage was a disaster. They divorced, and Russ spent the next eighteen years in and out of court fighting for visitation rights with the daughter they had together. He would win, and months later his ex-wife would be back in court with new allegations. It went on and on until the girl turned eighteen. I felt deeply sorry for Russ. No father deserves that kind of torture.

After Russ and I parted ways around 2004, it was just me and Martha. Plus her seven children and occasionally her brother Rick, a wonderful person with a soft, calm voice who lived with his parents in the same house where he and Martha had grown up, just a couple of miles from her place.

For about fourteen years, Martha and I kept the Sabbath together. She had stayed very close to me because she paid close attention to everything I taught, and when things kept happening the way I said they would, she was convinced she needed to stay close. We always got along very well.

But there were problems I could not fix. Martha would sometimes dress inappropriately. I told her it was not appropriate. She would say OK and dress better for a while, and then go right back. This went on year after year. Especially since I was not married, it was difficult.

Then Martha's daughter Rachel broke my heart.

When Rachel was a little girl, she used to ride in my truck sitting right next to me. When I would say "Neutralize!" she would grab the gear shift and put it into neutral. She loved doing it. So did I. She grew up into a stunningly beautiful young woman — as beautiful as anyone you have ever seen.

Around 2018, Martha called to tell me that Rachel was in the San Jose jail. I did not ask what happened. I did not weigh the pros and cons. I said, "Enough. I am headed there now."

At the jail I found out that Rachel had been working at one of the new legal marijuana stores and had started using. It was destroying her mind — not the mild effects people associate with marijuana, but something closer to a hallucinogen. She recognized me, and we had a wonderful time talking and laughing about old memories,

especially about neutralizing. But she was no longer the happy girl I had always known. She was sad, and she needed serious help.

I got her out of jail. I called Martha a few days later and told her to contact Rachel immediately — she and her young son could come live with me as long as they wanted. Rent free. Food, utilities, everything paid for. Rachel said yes.

But something happened. She never came.

I wondered why Rick and his parents, who had a big house, did not take Rachel and her son in. Most people care. But caring and acting are two very different things.

A few years later, I got a call. Rachel had been murdered. Strangled. Found by a railroad track.

That was the end of my little neutralizing Rachel. Who may have been the most beautiful woman in the world. But God willing, I will see her again. And this time, things will hopefully turn out much better.

Around 2019, after I returned from spending a few years in New Jersey and Philadelphia, I went to visit Martha at her apartment. She had gained weight since I had last seen her, and the truth is she looked wonderful — she had always been too skinny from constant worrying, but now her figure was perfect. But she was wearing a loose top and tight body-fitting shorts. The whole evening was absolute torture.

When I drove home that night, I said to myself: that is enough. I will never see her again.

And I have not. She has called. She has emailed. I have not responded. It was not anger. It was self-preservation. I had told her for years, and she would not change.

Of the original group — Russ, Rob, Mike S, Martha, and Josefa — most eventually went their separate ways. Rob got overconfident in his own knowledge. Mike S chose a wife over the calling. Josefa got swept into strange doctrines. Russ went deep into the calendar question and the Hebrew Roots movement. And Martha — I simply had to walk away for my own sake.

I was now truly alone. A small flock of one.

But that has always been the story of God's true church. When you refuse to compromise, when you refuse to follow the crowd, when you hold fast to the truth no matter what — you often end up standing alone. Moses stood alone. Elijah stood alone. Polycarp stood alone. Polycrates stood alone. And now the retired PE teacher and track coach, the kid from Philadelphia who learned to spot con men before he learned to drive — he was standing alone too.

Still keeping the Sabbath. Still studying. Still writing. Still standing.

CHAPTER 14

Nothing New Under the Sun

This chapter serves as both a summary of the book and a warning to the church today.

What happened to the Worldwide Church of God was not unique. It was not even unusual. It was the two-thousand-year-old pattern repeating itself — the same pattern that began in the first century and has never stopped.

The Pattern Begins: The 1st and 2nd Centuries

Clement of Rome (3rd Pope, died ~100 AD) — The very Clement mentioned by Paul in Philippians 4:3 as a fellow laborer. A man who personally knew the apostles. And yet Clement was the first person, as far as anyone can tell, to introduce the concept of centralized church authority — “obey the leaders” instead of “obey the Bible.” His letter to the Corinthians, written around 96 AD, demanded submission to church leadership. It is considered the earliest affirmation of apostolic succession. This happened while the apostle John was still alive. The wolf came from within, exactly as Paul had warned in Acts 20:29.

Sixtus I (6th Pope, ~115–126 AD) — His name means “sixth.” He was the sixth pope. He took what Clement had started and formalized it with rules and credentials: only sacred ministers could touch the sacred vessels, and bishops summoned to Rome could not

be received back by their own congregations without letters from the Holy See. Sixtus did not invent the system. He institutionalized it. And there is a detail about the name Sixtus that should send a chill through every student of prophecy. There have been five popes named Sixtus. If the next pope takes the name Sixtus VI, he would be the sixth pope named “Sixth” — and the original Sixtus was the sixth pope. Maybe not three sixes as in “666” but very interesting and curious nonetheless.

Irenaeus of Lyon (~130–202 AD) — He solidified everything. Irenaeus compiled the official list of succession from Peter onward, and then he wrote the line that became the foundation of everything: “With that church [Rome], because of its superior origin, all the churches must agree.” Not respect Rome. Not consult Rome. Agree with Rome. Irenaeus made centralized government a theological principle. Questioning the structure became the same as questioning God Himself. Ironically, Irenaeus himself identified “Latinos” as adding up to 666 — pointing at Rome’s own number while simultaneously building Rome’s power.

The Faithful Ones

Polycarp of Smyrna (~69–155 AD) — Personally taught by the apostle John. Kept the Passover on Nisan 14, the biblical date. Traveled to Rome around 155 AD and confronted Bishop Anicetus, who had abandoned the Passover in favor of Easter Sunday observance. Polycarp refused to budge. The apostle John taught him to keep the Passover, and he was not about to change it because Rome said so. Anicetus and Polycarp parted in peace, each holding firmly to his own position.

Polycrates of Ephesus (~130–196 AD) — From a family of eight Christian bishops, all faithful to apostolic teaching. When Pope

Victor attempted to force the Asian churches to abandon the Passover in favor of Easter Sunday around 192 AD, Polycrates did not mince words. He named the apostles and faithful bishops who had kept the Passover before him and declared that he would not be intimidated by threats. Victor wanted to excommunicate all of the Churches of God in the East — the very churches that had been taught by the apostle John himself. Even Irenaeus, who had written that all churches must agree with Rome, told Victor he was going too far. But the intent was clear: Rome wanted absolute control.

The Two Confrontations

Round 1: Polycarp vs. Anicetus (~155 AD) — They disagreed about which to keep, Passover on the 14th of Nisan or Easter Sunday, but kept the peace.

Round 2: Polycrates vs. Victor (~192 AD) — This was war. Victor excommunicated all of the churches in Asia Minor for disagreeing with him. The entire Church in the East — the churches that had been taught by the apostle John — cut off by Rome. The faithful church was always in the East, always the small flock, always outnumbered by Rome.

The WCG Parallel

The parallels between the early church apostasy and the Worldwide Church of God are precise:

Clement = Herman Hoeh — The intellectual architect who introduced centralized government into the organization. Neither was the top man. Both built the framework that others would later exploit.

Sixtus = Rod Meredith — The enforcer who formalized and expanded the structure. Meredith himself admitted in 1993 that he and Hoeh formulated church government together. One planted, the other watered.

Irenaeus = Herbert W. Armstrong — The one who made centralized government a theological principle. Armstrong declared himself the apostle and made the government structure not just a practical arrangement but a doctrinal requirement. Questioning the structure became the same as questioning God.

Victor = Joseph W. Tkach — The one who used the machinery to punish and destroy. Victor excommunicated the faithful churches. Tkach used the system that Hoeh built, that Meredith enforced, and that Armstrong made doctrine — and turned it against the very truths it was supposed to protect.

Now, Rod Meredith and HWA were nothing like Sixtus and Irenaeus, except in the area of church government. In this area, they were similar.

The Cycle Through History

And this pattern did not stop in the second century. It repeated over and over again throughout history:

William Davis (1663–1745) — Started attending God’s true church in 1710 and was authorized to preach by 1713. Once he got a foothold and a position of authority, he began introducing false doctrines, including the trinity. Many of his teachings were Protestant. The church once again started allowing Protestant teachings within the church. The same old vicious cycle.

The 1818 Split — The vast majority who had accepted the truth of God mixed with Protestant teachings were separated from the few

who had held fast to the true beliefs. The majority united and became the “Seventh Day Baptists.” The few remained faithful and retained the name and beliefs of the Church of God.

The Adventist Movement (1840s–1860) — Former Adventists who gave up Sunday worship, the trinity, and other false beliefs became members of the Church of God. But it was not long before many of these “Adventist” people became influential and started changing the church’s teachings. By 1860, they rejected the name “Church of God” and adopted “Seventh Day Adventists.” Once again, only a few faithful members held fast to the truth.

The Sardis Era (1920s–1930s) — By the 1900s, the Church of God had lost many true doctrines and was about to die. Revelation 3:1-2 describes exactly this condition. God began working through Herbert W. Armstrong. The leading ministers rejected the knowledge God was inspiring through Armstrong, so God eventually separated Armstrong and a few loyal followers, beginning the Philadelphia Era.

The Liberal 1970s — While Armstrong traveled the world, top ministers at headquarters watered down the pure doctrines. One by one, the true teachings were diluted, protestantized, compromised, and liberalized. The same devastating cycle yet again. Armstrong cleaned it up beginning in 1979.

The WCG Under Tkach (1986–1995) — The late twentieth-century version of the same two-thousand-year-old story.

THE LESSON

Every single time, the pattern is the same. The church grows relatively large. Heretics within the organization take over. Slowly

but surely they change many of the truths of the Bible. Then a split occurs. And always — always — it is the vast, overwhelming majority that stays with the watered-down church, and just a few who separate into the true Church of God.

The Worldwide Church of God was not a new story. It was the oldest story in Christianity.

Clement built the framework. Sixtus formalized it. Irenaeus made it doctrine. Victor used it as a weapon. Polycarp and Polycrates held fast to what the apostles had taught them and refused to bend.

Herman Hoeh built the framework. Rod Meredith formalized it. Herbert Armstrong made it doctrine. Joseph Tkach used it as a weapon. If I identify with anyone in this two-thousand-year story, it is Polycrates, who did not mince words. He named names. He threw Acts 5:29 in the pope's face. And he did not flinch when Rome excommunicated him for it.

Separated by nearly two thousand years, the story was identical. The names changed. The pattern never did.

*“For I know this, that after my departure **savage wolves** will come in among you, not sparing the flock.”* (Acts 20:26 NKJV)

*“But I also have a message for the rest of you in Thyatira who have not followed their false teaching (‘deeper truths,’ as they call them — **depths of Satan**, actually). I will ask nothing more of you except that you hold tightly to what you have until I come.”* (Revelation 2:24-25 NLT)

Same playbook. Same language. Same result.

Hold fast to the truth. Trust the Source, not the middleman. And never forget that God's true church has always been — and always will be — a small flock.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Michael H. Exton is a running coach, biblical researcher, author, and retired school teacher with forty-seven years of independent study. A Philadelphia native who spent most of his adult life in the San Francisco Bay Area, he was the first person from that region to be removed from the Worldwide Church of God for exposing the Tkach apostasy in real time — not after the fact, but while the con was still being run.

He is the founder of the California Grizzlies Running Club and spent thirty-seven years coaching elite youth distance runners, producing national team and individual champions. He is the author of more than twenty-five books spanning biblical prophecy, church history, natural health, fiction, and an autobiography.

His website is www.TheBibleComesAlive.org.

BOOKS BY MICHAEL H. EXTON

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The Secret to Vibrant, Radiant Health!

The Sickness Industry (written as Max Sterling)

Autobiography

From the Projects to the Podium

What happens when the wolves don't come through the back door — but through the pulpit?

The Worldwide Church of God was no ordinary religious organization. At its peak it had 145,000 members, 800 congregations in 100 countries, a television broadcast reaching millions, and a magazine with a circulation larger than *Time*. It was built over fifty years by a man who mostly went directly to the Bible and taught what it actually said.

And then, from the inside, it was systematically destroyed.

The Depths of Satan is the story of how it happened — the men who did it, the doctrines they dismantled, the members they scattered, and the language they used to sell it all. It is also the story of the few who saw it coming.

But more than that, it is a warning. Because what happened to the Worldwide Church of God was not new. It was the same two-thousand-year-old pattern — the same playbook, the same language, the same result — repeating itself once again.

*“For I know this, that after my departure **savage wolves** will come in among you, not sparing the flock.”* (Acts 20:26)

*“Deeper truths, as they call them — **depths of Satan**, actually.”* (Revelation 2:24-25)

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THE DEPTHS OF **SATAN**

*How Wolves Devoured
the Worldwide Church of God
& Why It Was Nothing New*



MICHAEL H. EXTON