

Out *of the* Shadows

Finding *God's*
Truth in a World
of Deception

J. Thomas Lapacka

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This work about my struggles to find the true God and peace with Him is dedicated to my wife, Linda. She has been my faithful companion and friend through these many years of searching and struggling. Never once has she wavered in her love and support for me. In those dark nights when I wrestled with life-changing theological questions, she always encouraged me to press on and not to rest until the truth was found. May our Lord richly bless her.

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Acknowledgments

Few, if any, works are done in a vacuum, much less alone. So it is with this book. First, I must thank my dear friend Rev. George Mather, who encouraged me to write my story, telling me that many others would benefit from reading it. George became my pastor, praying for Linda and me, helping me to wrestle through theological issues, and always pointing us to Christ as our true rest. Rev. Larry Nichols has become a friend. He tirelessly edited my manuscript, ensuring clarity of thought. Larry and I have had many helpful exchanges on the phone that have contributed to my greater understanding of the Gospel. Finally, I want to thank Pastor General Joseph Tkach Jr., who graciously reviewed chapters 7 through 9, which pertain particularly to his father and himself. His comments were most helpful in giving a more balanced view of the events we both experienced.

Foreword

Out of the Shadows is a true story about a man, his family, and their spiritual pilgrimage from active involvement in a cult to conversion to orthodox Christianity. Tom Lapacka was a well-known and respected member of the Worldwide Church of God (WCG), which was founded by Herbert W. Armstrong. As a young man, Tom became an avid follower of Armstrong and rose in rank in the organization to top executive positions at the church's international headquarters in Pasadena, California. Then things changed, slowly but surely. Tom is now an ordained minister in The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. In this narrative, Tom tells of his exodus from Pasadena, the struggles that brought it about, and his arrival in the Promised Land of grace.

After researching and writing about cults for more than 22 years, rarely, if ever, have I heard an account such as the one you are about to read. It demonstrates with clarity the faithfulness of God. Like all cults, legalism was the dominant motif of the WCG. Tom's story is a somber testimony of the effects of the Law, which bound his conscience and shackled his soul, finally driving him not toward God, but away. Nearly 500 years ago, a German monk named Martin Luther sat in the small confines of his quarters in an Augustinian monastery. Luther, too, had been driven by guilt to seek a holy life and to please God. But the more diligently he searched, the more alienation Luther felt. The more he tried to keep the Law, the more he failed. The more responsibility he knew he had before God, the more his inability to live responsibly became appar-

ent. Driven almost to despair, Luther discovered the gracious words of the Gospel as St. Paul wrote: “For in the Gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: ‘The righteous will live by faith’” (Romans 1:17). This rallying cry of the Protestant Reformation would stretch itself through the centuries and touch millions of lives. One of those touched by the Gospel is Tom Lapacka. Once Tom started to read Scripture with unveiled eyes, he began to experience the wondrous and healing powers of grace. Tom discovered the heart of God as found in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Tom has discovered that Jesus is not his taskmaster, but his Savior. This narrative relates how this all came about in Tom’s life. It is a story from God’s heart to his and now from his heart to yours.

The Worldwide Church of God itself has undergone a vast transformation from cult to Christianity. After Armstrong’s death in 1986, Joseph Tkach Sr., Armstrong’s hand-picked successor, almost immediately began to “deArmstrongize” the WCG. The past 15 years have wrought an incredible amount of change in the WCG. With Larry Nichols, I co-authored the book *Discovering the Plain Truth* (Intervarsity Press, 1998) in which we tell the story of the new Worldwide Church of God from the perspective of outside researchers. Tom, on the other hand, will relate the many changes in the WCG from his unique perspective as a top leader within the organization—a perspective we can never share. The names of Joseph Tkach Sr., as well as the new Pastor General, Joseph Tkach Jr., appear in *Out of the Shadows*.

As Lutheran ministers, Larry and I have been pleased to help Tom. He taught us much about the WCG. At the same time, we are honored to have been in a position to assist him on his faith journey. Today, Tom is director of communications for The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS). Before accepting this call, Tom was pastor of an LCMS congregation not far from where he had been caught in the deceptions of a

cult that lived in the shadows and knew not God's grace in the person of the crucified and resurrected Christ. Now Tom cannot get enough of God's grace and wants to share it with you as he tells of his emergence from the darkness into the light.

—Rev. George Mather

Introduction

My Own Journey

Truth is incontrovertible. Panic may resent it; ignorance may deride it; malice may distort it; but there it is.—Sir Winston Churchill (Information)

I have a story to tell. It has been a struggle to decide whether to dig into this painful past, a past filled not only with my struggles and anguish, but also those of a whole host of other people whom I know well. This deep sense of hurt, betrayal, and disillusionment is not easily laid aside, as I wish it could be. My inner turmoil is not the result of a blinding moment of agony; rather, it is the result of a gradual and insidious buildup of many moments and agonies over the years. People experience physical pain when they are injured or deep emotional hurt when they lose a loved one. But this is a different kind of inner turmoil: a spiritual pain that has gnawed at my soul, driving me into moments of deep and almost comfortless anguish.

Fast approaching 50 years old, I awoke one morning to the realization that the previous 30 years of my life had been a tragic mistake. Imagine a 30-year dream almost instantly transformed into a nightmare. The last three decades of my life had been earnestly spent believing that I was a blessed participant in a spiritual revolution of epic proportions known as the Worldwide Church of God (WCG). In what seemed to be the twinkling of an eye, this illusion was swept aside. Far

from traveling in the light of truth—and much to my horror—I realized that I had been walking in spiritual darkness, immersed in shadows and illusions. It is part of my struggle and pain to relate how I have emerged from the shadows and into the light. As the light of a sun-filled and cloudless day dissipates the shadows of darkness and night, I will relate my story of how the glorious light of truth has displaced the shadows of 30 years. I feel a kinship with Dimitri Volkogonov, a three-star general and former head of the Soviet Army's Political Administration, who became director of the Institute of Military History in 1985. Volkogonov, once a devout Marxist, wrote in *Autopsy for an Empire*:

For many years I was an orthodox Marxist, and it was only late in my life, after long and tortuous inner struggle, that I was able to free myself of the chimera of Bolshevik ideology. I felt enormous relief, and at the same time a sense of deep regret that I had wasted so many years in Utopian captivity.¹

The utopia that Herbert W. Armstrong promised, and for which I had labored and sacrificed, crumbled just as did the Soviet Union. I feel the same deep regret for wasting 30 years of my life and that of my family chasing a hoax built on heresy and buoyed up by the sacrifices of hundreds of thousands of people like myself.

This is not a documentary or a dispassionate history; rather, it is a personal narrative of my experiences as a member, minister, and executive in the Worldwide Church of God. Many other WCG members—past and present—will identify with this account. Indeed, many have walked in the same shadows for the past decades. And, sadly, many continue to live under the shadows cast by Herbert Armstrong and his utopian dream.

Readers should note at the outset that the purpose of this book is not to tear down, but to edify. In the early 1990s, God performed a truly miraculous work in the Worldwide Church of God. Through the work of the Holy Spirit, what was once a cult has been transformed, and many WCG members are now evangelical Christians. Dr. Ruth Tucker, visiting professor at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School and author of 12 books, wrote in the July 15, 1996, issue of *Christianity Today* that the historic changes in the WCG represented the first time such an “unorthodox fringe group” had made the move to Christianity.

Many who still count themselves members of the Worldwide Church of God or who find themselves ensnared in any one of the numerous offshoots of the Armstrong movement do not yet understand what those who have moved out of the shadows have grasped about our past misconceptions. We were called a “cult” for decades, but we denied it, of course. We were taught that the word *cult* was used to describe us by mainline Christian churches and denominations. Because they regarded us as a cult, we regarded them as wrought with paganism and false teachings inspired by the devil. Any opposition from other church bodies was considered “persecution,” similar in our minds to what the Christians of the early church faced. We believed that we were God’s true little flock.

I received a great shock when my predecessor, an executive of the Worldwide Church of God, told me in the early 1990s that we were, in fact, a cult. He said we were making progress in shedding our cultish practices. His words shocked me beyond measure, and I felt as though the wind had been knocked out of my sails.

As I continued to investigate on my own, his words proved true. In the books I read, I saw more clearly that some major characteristics that constitute a cult were very much part of our organization.² So many people are easily influenced

and led into cults, yet defining a cult is no easy task. Various disciplines define the term differently, taking at least three main approaches. The theological approach, used mostly within Christianity, defines a cult as a group that teaches doctrines that are not orthodox. The psychological approach seeks to offer insights into the basis for a cult, that is, its psychological characteristics, such as mind control and manipulative techniques. The sociological approach, like the psychological, tries to define a cult based on a study of people and cultures.³ In reviewing my years in the WCG, I will present not only the theological or doctrinal model, but also certain cultic sociological and psychological characteristics that were present in the Worldwide Church of God.

The following are some primary characteristics of cults.

The deity of Jesus Christ is diminished or denied. The WCG taught, for example, that there were two separate and distinct deities within the Godhead (we used the term “God family”). Jesus was ranked lower in the family than the Father. Further, we believed that Jesus could have sinned while in the flesh, which in effect denies His deity. We called this the “great gamble,” teaching that the Father put everything on the line when He sent Jesus to earth as a man. If Jesus had sinned, He would immediately have been disqualified as Savior and Lord. Orthodox Christianity always has taught the union of the human and divine natures in Jesus Christ. Thus, Christ’s deity would make it impossible for Him to sin. Many cults fail to understand or grasp that Jesus’ human nature is not to be separated from His divine, as though Christ were some sort of a split personality. Jesus was and is fully divine as well as fully human; however, He is without the taint of original sin. Thus, we have a Savior who could not only represent us as man, but also stand before the Father as God.

The doctrine of the Trinity is diminished or denied. In cultic circles, the denial of Christ’s deity goes hand in hand with the

denial of the Trinity. In the WCG, we believed, taught, and published that God was a family comprised of two separate Gods and that the Holy Spirit was simply the “power of God,” who was present to carry out God’s will but not a full and distinct Person within a Triune Godhead. This mirrors an ancient heresy that dates to the fourth century and is attributed to Macedonius, who defined the Holy Spirit as a divine energy diffused throughout the universe. Modern Jehovah’s Witnesses also teach that the Holy Spirit is God’s “active force,” not a Person of the Triune Godhead. So many heresies find their seedbed in the misunderstanding that God is one essence, yet three Persons (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit), distinct but not separate. This truly is a divine mystery; however, just because human minds cannot comprehend God does not give license to invent a god that we can understand. Any person who will deny the Trinity—as did Armstrong’s Worldwide Church of God and as do many of today’s splinter groups from the WCG—is sadly outside the true Christian faith.

God is humanized, and man is deified. Although a certain aspect of this is true (the incarnation is God becoming human, and salvation is, in a sense, drawing believers to Christ-likeness), cults teach that God has somehow completely emptied Himself of divinity and has invested humanity with the marks of deity. In the WCG, we believed that it was within man’s potential to become God as “God is God.” This is a clear failure to separate creation from the Creator, which St. Paul says is the ultimate sin of false religion (Romans 1:18f).

Cults claim divine revelation apart from the Bible as a source of authority. On this point, Herbert W. Armstrong taught that God had given him 18 “revealed” truths to restore within the “one true church” on earth, which, of course, was the WCG. These truths included God’s desire for a hierarchical form of church government; God had restored the true Gospel through Mr. Armstrong after more than 18 centuries of error; God is a family, not a Trinity; the Christian is now only “begotten” but

will only be born again in the future time of the resurrection; and the modern identity of the 10 lost tribes of Israel. Since Mr. Armstrong's death, most of these "revealed" truths have been found wanting in the light of credible biblical scholarship. Amazingly, the utter poverty of the scholarship that supported his heretical teachings has not phased those still left among Mr. Armstrong's followers. Because he claimed to have been taught personally by Christ—"the living Word of God"—Mr. Armstrong's followers trembled at the thought of questioning even his most audacious claims.

There is only one true church on earth, and we are it. Every cult teaches this, and the WCG was no exception. This extreme sectarianism denies the orthodox teaching that the church is the universal body of Christ. The one exclusive community of faith known as the WCG was the sole recipient of God's grace on earth. We believed that all those who did not conform to our teachings were false churches. This infatuation with being "the only ones" or "the only true church" engendered a "we vs. they" attitude among WCG members. The WCG became a kind of bastion of "truth" that must be protected at all costs from the onslaughts of the heathen and "pagan Christianity."

Salvation is achieved through a combination of grace and works. This was a dominant theme in the WCG. Although we would often hear that one is saved by grace, this was often followed by a reminder to keep the Law so we could "make it" (attain salvation in the kingdom of God). Therefore, we never had the assurance of salvation in and through Christ Jesus alone. When we spoke of God's kingdom, we often would say, "I hope I make it." To ensure that we would "make it," we kept a long laundry list of Old Testament laws that had been selected rather capriciously. Our Herculean efforts at law-keeping only unsettled us all the more because we could never be certain that our obedience was good enough to be acceptable to God. So, we would strive all the more "to qualify" ourselves to be granted eternal life with God. When any degree of salvation is based on human

merit, Christ's finished work on the cross is replaced by the need for additional human works. Therefore, sinners who have broken God's Law can never be certain of anything, but they continue to experience guilt, thinking there is always more required to appease God's wrath. All cults, as well as non-Christian world religions, teach this.

I hasten to add, however, that the current leadership of the WCG has rejected all these non-biblical positions and has come to embrace fully the Christian teaching that salvation is by grace through faith in Christ alone. These vast changes and shifts away from Armstrong's errors have not come without a severe price. In the wake of these transformations, turmoil has resulted in the WCG from losses in both membership and financial contributions.

Aside from the obvious doctrinal errors, certain sociological and psychological characteristics are also prevalent in cults and were evident in the WCG as well.

1. *The leader of the cult wields total power and absolute authority.* This has certainly been the case in the history of the WCG. Herbert W. Armstrong set up articles and bylaws that gave him absolute unchangeable authority. These articles and bylaws are still official, which has been a cause for concern among current WCG leadership. Greg Albrecht, spokesperson for the WCG, wrote:

The WCG continues to address the substantial number of doctrinal and organizational issues that a transformation of this magnitude involves. Doctrine was our first priority, we believe both of necessity and divinely inspired ... Following the sale of our headquarters campus [in Pasadena, California] and relocation, the WCG will then be able

to address a number of other issues that need resolution, including structure and governance.

I look forward to this hope becoming reality for the membership of the WCG.

2. *Cult leaders are self-appointed, persuasive persons who claim to have a special mission in life or to have special knowledge.* I remember that Mr. Armstrong was often referred to and often referred to himself as “God’s apostle.” He compared his apostleship to that of the apostle Paul. Just as Paul had claimed that he was taught by no man but by Jesus Christ (Galatians 1:11–12), Armstrong audaciously made similar claims. As Paul had opposed Peter (Galatians 2), Armstrong had even dared to oppose Paul on at least one occasion. He faulted the latter for not collecting tithes from some of his Greek converts. (See 1 Corinthians 9:1–12.) Mr. Armstrong’s special mission was often referred to as the “Work” (another oft-used term among the cults). By this Armstrong meant the “Work” of bringing God’s end-time message of warning to the modern descendants of the 10 lost tribes of Israel. Part of the “Work” included building three college campuses, each of which would be called Ambassador College. Other parts of the “Work” included spending millions to boost the circulation of the church’s magazine, *The Plain Truth*, and to purchase radio and television airtime. Millions more were spent to fund the Ambassador Foundation and its 20-year tradition of world-class concerts in the exquisite and lavish Ambassador Auditorium. Enormous sums of money were spent to whisk Armstrong around the world in his Gulfstream II jet to visit various heads of state. In the final analysis, his trips accomplished little besides providing photos for *The Plain Truth*.

I must reflect on the enormous sums of money that gushed into WCG coffers over the decades and the cost to the members who faithfully gave and gave and gave. The “Work” was all-important, much like the ideology of the now-defunct Soviet Union. The individual member became lost in the “Work,” being used and spent and, sadly, often cast aside when he or she faltered in allegiance or dedication. Now, years later, the “Work” is finished, lying in the ruins of history, a subject of research, debate, and memory. Having consumed millions of dollars and drained scores of thousands spiritually, it has been relegated to the infamy it so richly deserves.

Yet there are other groups—yes, even some Christian congregations—that are obsessed with their “work,” clothing it carefully in biblical language while claiming to serve God. And God’s people are used up and spiritually abused to feed the ego of some self-exalted “spiritual” leader. I have learned that people, not programs, are paramount. If people have to suffer to ensure a program’s success, regardless of how it is “baptized,” it is a tragic miscarriage of the pastoral commission Christ gave Peter: “Feed My sheep” (John 21:15–19).

3. *Cult leaders are often charismatic, determined, and controlling.* Again, Armstrong was no exception. He was a man with a mission, and nothing was going to prevent him from accomplishing it. His voice was authoritative and his manner extremely persuasive. Everyone thought that what Herbert W. Armstrong said was law. If he gave personal advice, the recipient thought he should follow it because he had received it from “God’s very own apostle.” To disagree with Armstrong or to veer away from his way of doing things was the same as disobeying God. Tragic consequences resulted from his pontifications. Families were split apart, jobs were lost, and careers were ended when he spoke his authority into peoples’ lives. In the same *Christianity Today* article quoted previously, Dr. Tucker comments that Herbert W. Armstrong “was larger

than life.” He was able to attract millions through his radio programs and their combination of wisdom and prophecy —and more than 200,000 people joined the WCG.

4. *Cults tend to venerate their leader, and the leader allows it.* To Armstrong’s credit, he did seem to try to prevent people from making too much of him. On one hand, he would claim that he had done nothing himself, only Christ through him. On the other hand, he often would thunder that God had raised him up for this special end-time mission. For the average WCG member, Herbert W. Armstrong was a VIP in God’s eyes, thus he deserved service and support. And service and support were most “cheerfully” rendered by virtually everyone. When delivering a sermon, we ministers in the WCG often would quote Mr. Armstrong along with the Bible, as though quoting Mr. Armstrong gave extra weight and authority to what we said.
5. *Cults harbor double standards.* One blatant example in the WCG was the elevated position enjoyed by the members of the clergy and the leadership. Those in the upper echelons of the WCG could afford the best material possessions and creature comforts (houses, clothes, cars, and food) while the laity lived with much less. Mr. Armstrong and his Pasadena-based executives lived in luxurious homes, but the ordinary folk struggled to pay monthly apartment rents and to make ends meet. Armstrong flew in a Gulfstream jet, dined on the finest china, and had his every need addressed by attentive staffers. At the same time, he encouraged financial sacrifice on the part of the membership so the “Work” would get done.
6. *A cult member’s time is monopolized by church activities, daily routine, or ritual.* We had weekly spokesmen clubs for the men, weekly Bible studies, weekly two-hour church services, annual holy days that sometimes lasted eight days, regular church activities, and more. If you

were a local leader, more work often was needed to help the minister, for example, accompanying him on visits or assisting with counseling. Added to this was the recommended minimum of 30 minutes of daily prayer, 30 minutes of daily Bible study, and fasting at least once a month. We were busy people. This left us little time to pursue higher education (which was frowned on) or personal hobbies. Those who gave themselves wholeheartedly to the church were indeed busy.

7. *Cults claim exclusivity.* We were taught that God directed His attention exclusively at His one true church—the Worldwide Church of God. Every other so-called Christian group was deceived. Sooner or later (later being either in the millennial reign of Christ or in a second resurrection to physical life) unconverted people would have to come to the same doctrinal understanding that we had so they could be saved. Mr. Armstrong believed that the history of the true church was taught in Revelation 2 and 3, where he saw the seven churches as seven “eras.” He taught that the Worldwide Church of God was the prophesied “Philadelphia era.” At the conclusion of the work of this era, the infidels would finally fall on their knees to worship at the feet of those of us who would be born as gods into the God family. (See Revelation 3:7–13.)

Such exclusivity can be found in extreme forms of denominationalism, in which members of a denomination believe and claim that their denomination is the “one and only” true church. Where such beliefs are held, it is not a far leap to feel disdain and distrust for others, even in the Christian church. Even now as a Lutheran pastor I find the ugly head of sectarianism showing itself in the Christian community. I encourage all who claim Christ as their Lord and Savior to love those who claim the name of Christ, rejoice in the clarity of doctrine you may have, and engage in open discus-

sion of differences with other Christians, but let us not disgrace our Lord by denigrating fellow believers in other Christian denominations.

8. *Cults discourage social contact with “unconverted” friends and relatives.* Conversion to the WCG meant association only with its members, lest we be “polluted” by the world. The sad result was that in many cases, including my own, we estranged ourselves from family and friends. Outsiders thought we were “religious fanatics.” Such name calling did not bother us because we had one another, and we thought they were the ones who were deceived. We also believed that being laughed at and “persecuted” was further proof that we had the truth. After all, didn’t Jesus say His followers would be persecuted for righteousness sake?

The Worldwide Church of God was a classic cult. Granted, it never achieved the notoriety of the Jonestown cult, nor did the federal authorities storm our buildings as was the tragic case of the Branch Davidians in Waco, Texas. Perhaps that is precisely what makes it so hard for many current and former WCG members to say, “I was in a cult.” After all, we were not planning mass suicides, engaged in weird practices, nor operating as antigovernment gun-toting anarchists. Our leader was not a Jim Jones or a David Koresh. We were simple people who were zealous for God and His Word. We listened to a man who seemed to have it all together. We believed, but he deceived us, though I do not think he did so deliberately. Herbert W. Armstrong was simply misguided himself, influenced by his time and culture and swept along by what appears to have been a latent desire to be “successful.” Armstrong’s efforts flourished at a time when God’s grace was being turned into license in the United States. It was a time when people seemed to care little for God’s Law or for proper obedience to it. In his own understanding, Armstrong’s ministry sought to address the concept of “cheap grace.” Time showed, however,

that he overreacted and emphasized works at the expense of grace. In so doing, Armstrong lost that grace altogether, leaving legalism in its place. Legalism is the deadly poison that always has haunted the church and is the one certain hallmark of all the world's cults and false religions.

I hope that by telling this story and pointing out some painful truths, I will praise our Lord for what He has done in my life and in the lives of thousands of those who, like me, were walking in the shadows. This story is an affirmation of God's mighty work through the Holy Spirit. It is a testimony to those men and women in the Worldwide Church of God who trust the saving grace of Jesus.

I hope this story is helpful to Worldwide Church of God members who are in need of assurance that what has taken place in the WCG is truly the Lord's work. I also hope that my story might prompt discussion among those in pseudo-Christian organizations who are still walking in the shadows and do not know it. Perhaps these words will enable members to stop and reflect on what they believe, who or what they are following, and whether it is the orthodox faith delivered to the church by our Lord, taught by the apostles, and preserved in the church for nearly 2,000 years. Finally, I trust that those who have been blessed with an orthodox Christian upbringing will have not only a deeper appreciation for God's truth, but will be reminded to remain vigilant so they will not be led astray by some "new wind of doctrine" championed by a charismatic leader who offers visions of great works that obscure the crucified Christ.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Autopsy for an Empire: The Seven Leaders Who Built the Soviet Regime by Dmitri Volkogonov, translated and edited by Harold Shukman. Copyright

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- 2 Information on the characteristics of cults is available in several good reference works, including Ruth Tucker, *Another Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989); David Johnson and Jeff Vanvonderen, *The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse* (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1977); Ronald Rhodes, *The Culting of America* (Eugene: Harvest House Publishers, 1994); and George Mather & Larry Nichols, *Dictionary of Cults, Sects, Religions, and the Occult* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993).
- 3 In his book *Unmasking the Cults* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), Alan Gomes presents a serious and well-reasoned case for why the psychological and sociological approaches present serious deficiencies and why the theological approach to defining a cult is to be preferred.

Chapter 1

Stepping into the Shadows

Heresies perish not with their authors, but, like the river Arethusa, though they lose their currents in one place, they rise up again in another.—Clement of Alexandria (*Stromateis I*)

Some of my earliest recollections revolve around life in the church. My parents, however, were not particularly religious people. Dad, who grew up in a Polish ghetto in Springfield, Massachusetts, was a Roman Catholic by birth and remained so throughout his life. I never remember seeing him go to Mass, though, and the only way he was involved with the church was to give offerings fairly regularly. Whenever the census taker came around, however, he would invariably check the box indicating Catholic as his religion.

In contrast, my mom was a Southern Baptist. She had been raised on a tobacco farm in the North Carolina tidewater region. I recall that she went to church a couple times on Easter or Christmas, and Dad even went along once. Usually, Mom stayed away from church. But she did watch Oral Roberts on television in the early days of black-and-white TV evangelism. She would tune in to the tent meetings where Roberts would preach his fiery sermons and conduct his healing revivals.

I do not know why my parents felt as they did about the church. Dad always spoke positively about it and always in-

sisted that I should go. He believed it would be a good influence. He never condemned any religious denomination or fellowship; he just did not participate in the life of the church. Mom was not as gracious toward the church as Dad. She regularly castigated many people as church-going “hypocrites.” At the same time, however, she insisted with Dad that my sister and I attend regularly during our childhood years.

Sadly, my parents were like many professing Christians. They remained strangers to the church where Christ offers forgiveness, spiritual nurture, and assurance of salvation. But is the church merely a place where people gather, sing a few hymns, hear a sermon, drop a dollar in the plate, then head home with little or no benefit? Such a perspective demonstrates a woeful lack of understanding of how the church is portrayed in the Bible. In Scripture, church is spoken of as the “bride of Christ,” “the mother of us all,” the “congregation of the saints,” the “anchor of faith.” It is in the church that we meet Christ our Savior. It is in the church that we receive faith through the reading and preaching of God’s Word. It is in the church that God washes away our sins and gives us to new life through Baptism. It is in the church that Christ strengthens our faith by giving us His very body and blood in the holy sacrament of Communion. God is present among His people. He has promised never to leave nor forsake us. If we believe the Scripture with its promises, wild horses could not keep us from attending church regularly. Consider the attitude of King David, who doubtless was a busy man, but he always made time for regular worship. He believed in the presence of God in His temple when he wrote: “I rejoiced with those who said to me, ‘Let us go to the house of the Lord’” (Psalm 122:1).

We also should consider the impact our non-participation in regular worship has on our children. A recent study has disclosed that when both parents attend church regularly, 72 percent of their children remain faithful. When only the father attends, 55 percent remain faithful. If only the

mother attends, 15 percent remain in the church. If neither parent attends regularly, only 6 percent remain faithful. The statistics speak for themselves—the example of parents and adults is more important than all the efforts of the church and Sunday school.¹ The question is quite simple. Do we want our children to remain in the faith as adults? If so, worshiping with them as a regular part of their weekly childhood experiences is essential.

As a child, the nearest church to me was a Southern Baptist church. It was about two-and-a-half blocks from my house in the small lower middle-class community of Oak Hill, which is just outside Richmond, Virginia. The stately Venerable Street Baptist Church was a colonial brick building adorned in white trim that sat on a gentle knoll. It took me several years to ask why the church was named “Venerable Street” when it was located first on Cedar Street, then on Hartman Street. I was told that the church used to be in the city but “the neighborhood changed,” which is a euphemism that meant African Americans had settled in the city and the whites had moved to the suburbs. This shift in Richmond took place in the 1950s, and the members brought their church name with them. At the time of my childhood, segregation was the norm, and each race had its own churches, schools, and neighborhoods. I mention segregation because it would come to play a large role in shaping my beliefs about British Israelism and the superiority of the Anglo-Saxon race, which the Worldwide Church of God had embraced fully and which it taught until 1993 when this concept was rejected by WCG leadership.

My life as a youngster in the 1950s was good. We lived in a stable neighborhood. The men went to work, and the women stayed home with the children. Everyone seemed to have a nice house with a big yard, a car, and all the essentials, including a black-and-white television. Everyone knew everyone else

in the immediate neighborhood. Neighbors would stand in the early evening at the back fence, talking and sometimes disagreeing.

All the children knew one another and played together. We roamed the neighborhood and surrounding forests with no fear of harm. Crime did not seem to threaten us in the same way it threatens young people today. Life was good, perfunctory, and predictable: going to school, coming home to play, doing chores, and going to church on Sunday. Church attendance was part of most of our lives, and many of my neighborhood friends were as regular in attendance as I was. Several of us went to Venerable Street Baptist Church because it was the closest church.

For me, going to church was not an ordeal. As a child I seldom went to the 11 a.m. worship service, nor did most of my peers. We went to the 10 a.m. Sunday school. Venerable Street Baptist conducted a strong ministry for its youth. The Sunday school was full every week. The church sent buses through the neighborhood to transport children to the church. The facility was new and modern, and they had a good staff. The focus was always on Christ—His birth, life, death, and resurrection.

As opposed to the church of my childhood, orthodox Christianity was not the focus of the teaching of the Worldwide Church of God. Instead, we spent most of our time on issues that had little to do with Jesus' atoning work of salvation. Under Armstrong's leadership, we were preoccupied with things such as the identity of nations, end-time prophecy, the millennial reign of Christ, Sabbath and holy days, clean and unclean meats, and "qualifying" for the kingdom of God by observing the "dos and don'ts" of the Law, which the church taught was essential for salvation. These "shadows" obscured the cross and the atoning work of Christ. It was as though a veil had been placed over my eyes, preventing me from seeing the glorious and liberating light of the Gospel. This legalism

would lead me away from the Jesus I learned about at Venerable Street Baptist and into a world of religious hyperbole, judgmentalism, legalism, and, finally, personal despair. Paul speaks of a veil that is cast over the face of unbelieving Jews because of their focus on the Old Testament Law and their refusal to acknowledge Jesus as their Messiah and Lord:

Therefore, since we have such a hope, we are very bold. We are not like Moses, who would put a veil over his face to keep the Israelites from gazing at it while the radiance was fading away. But their minds were made dull, for to this day the same veil remains when the old covenant is read. It has not been removed, because only in Christ is it taken away. Even to this day when Moses is read, a veil covers their hearts. But whenever anyone turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away. (2 Corinthians 3:12–16)

It has been only in the last few years that I stepped out of the shadows and turned to Christ as the way, the truth, and the life, trusting in Him alone for salvation.

I remember our pastor at Venerable Street Baptist, Pastor Shaddock, as a kind and gentle man who faithfully preached God's Word every week. He always had a pleasant smile and a warm handshake, even for us young people, which made a lasting impression on me. I felt that he was truly a man of God, and I gladly listened to his sermons. As I grew older, I began to attend worship right after Sunday school class.

It has been a long time since I attended Venerable Street Baptist Church. Memories have faded, and many of those I do recall seem trivial today. However, several themes emerged from my childhood church experiences that I believe were essential to my journey from Calvary to Sinai, from grace to Law, from the light of the Gospel to the shadows of a misguided understanding of the Old Covenant.

One experience was developing a love for the church. I thank my parents for insisting, despite their own unfortunate lack of participation, that I attend worship. Church was a wonderful place to be. I felt God's presence and enjoyed a sense of awe, especially when I went into the sanctuary. At church, I learned many fundamental Christian truths. It was like meeting God on a weekly basis, and each week I would hear the call to repentance and the exhortation to trust in the Lord for salvation. Each week I was assured that Jesus was my friend, that He loved me, and that He had died for me so I could live forever with Him in heaven. It is of vital importance that parents take their children to church so they may hear this Gospel message. We dare not underestimate the power of God's Word to work faith and assurance in the hearts of all who hear—even our children. As Paul wrote: "Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ" (Romans 10:17).

The pastor's invitation to come forward followed the worship service. For me it was always a moving event to see someone go forward, confessing before all that he or she was a sinner who earnestly desired forgiveness and wished to trust in Jesus Christ's sacrifice for sin. I remember the special Sundays when new converts were baptized. They came out in their white baptismal robes with a wonderful look of peace and joy on their faces. Then, before the entire congregation, they stepped into the baptistery with the pastor and were immersed in the "waters of Jordan." I, too, looked forward to the day when I could make that public confession of faith and have my sins washed away. But that moment would come later rather than sooner. It would occur not in the baptistery of Venerable Street Baptist Church in front of the congregation, but alone in a galvanized water tank outside an old redwood building on the grounds of the WCG's Ambassador College in East Texas.

Christmas at Venerable Street Baptist was a favorite time. We were reminded of God's love for us and that He sent His Son, born as a baby, to live among us. As a child I could identify with the baby Jesus because knowing that He also had been a child meant He knew what it was like to be "a little guy." The Christmas story reminded me, too, of God's love for children, that they are close to His heart and receive His divine care.

In my teen years, I began to receive literature from the Radio Church of God, which was later renamed the Worldwide Church of God. I was shocked to learn through this literature that the celebration of Christmas Day was "pagan." Christ was not born on December 25 (which most Christians know), and Christmas was supposedly a continuation of the Roman feast of Saturnalia, which featured many evils that continued in the Christian church to the present. According to Jeremiah 10, my beloved Christmas tree with its inviting, warm multicolored lights was a pagan symbol. Herbert W. Armstrong claimed the Christmas tree was instituted by Nimrod's mother, Semiramus. She supposedly had married her son, and had, after his death, used the evergreen tree as a symbol of his rebirth. This was the first insidious intrusion into my simple faith. I found myself drawn to Armstrong's interpretation of Jeremiah 10 regarding Christmas and its pagan tree. The whole concept of Christmas started to become an abomination in my eyes.

The call from Mr. Armstrong was to be faithful to the Word of God regardless of the consequences in one's personal life. As a young child, I had learned in Sunday school and church that God had to be first in one's life, so what Mr. Armstrong said made sense to me. In retrospect, I now know that his fundamental premise was incorrect. Something once used or celebrated by pagans is not necessarily bad. Christmas, as celebrated by the Christian church, is not pagan. Instead, it is a time of rejoicing over God's great gift to humanity. But I

was young and impressionable, and no one I talked to at church could refute my newfound knowledge about Christmas. When I brought up the pagan origins of Christmas, quoted Jeremiah 10 about the heathen cutting trees from the forest and decorating them, and denounced the commercialism of the Christmas season, I drew fairly weak responses. The best response anyone could muster was, "Well, it doesn't mean that anymore," or "You are just getting too fanatical." The "church team" was batting 000 in my eyes. Their answers convinced me that they did not know anything or did not seem to care about the "truth." For me, the number one priority was to obey God. If that meant personal difficulty, so be it. I was like the Jews that Paul talked about in Romans who had a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge (Romans 10:2).

How was I going to present all my newfound knowledge to my parents? (Tact was not one of my strong points, and this lack of diplomacy would cause me no end of grief until years later when I studied public speaking at Ambassador College.) At age 15, with a lump in my throat, I announced to my parents that I refused to participate in any further Christmas celebrations. This frontal assault went over like a lead balloon. What followed were some pretty heated discussions that consisted mostly of my parents doing the discussing (lecturing) to me. Their arguments, however, were the same ones I had heard at church, which failed to dissuade me from my conviction. My parents' scriptural knowledge was limited, and their arguments boiled down to a command: "Observe Christmas or else!"

This argument did not sit well in my 15-year-old mind. I remained more or less steadfast in my convictions. I thought at the time that I was completely "alone in the faith" in Richmond. (I later discovered that the Worldwide Church of God had a congregation of more than 200 members in the city.) I was not sure exactly what was permitted or banned on Christmas, so at first I did not have a "no compromise" attitude

toward the holiday. Years later as a student at Ambassador College, however, I learned to be strict in total separation and avoidance of the Christmas season. Told it would not be right to accept Christmas cards or gifts, I was polite and thankful but firm in my refusal to participate. So with the zeal of a man with a cause, I resolved to refuse any gifts or cards during the Christmas season. “Christmas is pagan,” I bluntly remarked. To participate in the festivities would be an affront to God ... and that was that! What had been a wonderful time of family, friends, and worship became a battlefield littered with hurt feelings and deep misunderstandings.

This major decision was the first step in the process of alienation from those I loved most in my life. The hurt continues to some extent to this day. The wounds in my family have been healed, but some scars remain sensitive.

Easter was another wonderful time of year for me as a young boy. In Virginia, the dogwoods, tulips, and daffodils were in bloom; the grass was green from the spring rains and smelled so sweet when it was freshly cut. The warm spring sun shone brightly on the field behind Venerable Street Baptist Church, inviting us to break out the baseball bats and gloves for another season.

In the church, our attention turned to our crucified Savior. As a young boy and teenager, my understanding of the atoning sacrifice of Christ was limited, but the basic message got through. It was because of sin—my sin—that Jesus had to die. In His death was forgiveness of sin, and in His resurrection was new life for the repentant sinner. Venerable Street Baptist decorated the sanctuary with fresh lilies, everyone bought a new set of spring clothes to wear to church on Easter, and the kids went wild over Easter eggs and chocolate bunnies (which do not have much to do with the “reason for the season”).

But I learned from the Worldwide Church of God that Easter, like Christmas, was a pagan celebration! In fact, Herbert Armstrong had written a convincing pamphlet titled *The*

Resurrection Was Not on Sunday! Armstrong wrote that Jesus said He would be three days and three nights in the grave and then be resurrected to life. It was a simple matter, Armstrong wrote, to count from late afternoon on Friday to early Sunday morning and discover that this period of time is considerably less than 72 hours. Further, Mr. Armstrong claimed that Jesus wasn't even crucified on a cross, as commonly depicted in most churches, but on a stake. The cross, he maintained, was a pagan symbol of Tammuz, the son of the pagan Nimrod of Genesis 10. Even the first letter of Tammuz's name is a T, which is an *ankh* cross. These facts, coupled with some references to the use of the *ankh* cross as a common symbol among the Egyptians and Assyrians, made it an open-and-shut case for me. Then there were the hot cross buns that Mr. Armstrong found in Jeremiah 7:18, which mentions baking cakes to the queen of heaven, who was supposed to be Ishtar (where the word *Easter* was to have come). Was I shocked! Here again I was convinced that the Baptist church was deceiving me about Easter, just as it was about Christmas.

But the message of Easter had not been compromised at Venerable Street Baptist, despite the fact that Armstrong was writing and preaching on the radio that all the churches had it wrong and he alone was right. Of course, Armstrong put things in such a way that made it logical to conclude that only he had the truth. He would say, "Knock the dust off your Bibles and see for yourself. Don't believe me; believe your Bible." And sure enough, with his proof-text hermeneutic, those of us who were not grounded in orthodox Christianity were swept off our feet by his powerful and persuasive arguments. By my early teenage years, I was coming to the conviction that almost everything the churches taught was in error. The truth had been lost. Only in these last days had truth been revealed to Herbert Armstrong, a belief that is not far removed from the claims of the Mormons, another non-Christian cult.