

November 2014

Dear Brethren:

Although it is becoming a protracted process to write this history, we will carry on this month to summarize key events in the early life and work of Herbert Armstrong which contributed to the final events which affected the Worldwide Church of God in the 1970s and beyond. It is not only valuable to recount the means by which God worked through Herbert Armstrong to raise up His Church in the twentieth century, but also to compare his original approach to doctrine and administration to that which would materialize years later.

Most of this material is being summarized from *The Autobiography of Herbert W. Armstrong* (1967). We began this summary project in the June 2013 *Monthly Letter*, with the second installment in May 2014. Thus far we have covered Mr. Armstrong's life and work into 1933. In the last issue we recounted the specific personal experiences of Mr. and Mrs. Armstrong which led ultimately to the church teachings on key doctrines like church government, tithing, and divine healing. We also noted that in all of his attempts to work collectively with other Sabbath-keeping ministers, there was never any fruit. Only when Mr. Armstrong found himself teaching alone did individuals respond to the gospel message and choose to join the church.

Humble Beginnings of the Radio Church of God

In the spring of 1933, Mr. Armstrong had once again collaborated with another minister (Elder S. A. Oberg) for an evangelistic campaign over several months in the Salem, Oregon, area. Pentecostal elements had, for the most part, hijacked those meetings and chased away anyone who was interested in simple, straightforward Bible instruction (*Autobiography*, pp. 465–468). Because Mr. Armstrong was still being paid a small salary by the Oregon Conference of the Church of God, he felt obligated to defer to their authority in assigning his duties and to work with these other men, even though he was anxious to pursue other opportunities (p. 474). Mr. Armstrong describes one such opportunity which would mark the beginning of the Radio Church of God:

The meetings held by Elder S. A. Oberg and me in the "Hollywood" district of Salem, Oregon, ended on July 1, 1933. Just prior to this date I received an invitation that was to result in the start of the great worldwide Work of today.

This invitation came from Mr. and Mrs. Elmer E. Fisher. They were the

couple who had been brought into the church by our private Bible study in my room, the night the storm prevented the meeting, during the tent campaign in Eugene, in the summer of 1931. The Fishers were successful farmers, living seven miles west of Eugene. Mr. Fisher was a member of the school board of the one-room Firbutte school, eight miles west of Eugene on the old Elmira road. The Fishers asked me to hold meetings in this country schoolhouse, inviting me to be their guest in their farm home during the meetings (p. 474).

The Oregon Conference approved the plan for these meetings, and Mr. Armstrong began evening Bible studies almost nightly for several weeks. There were twenty-seven attendees at the very first meeting, on Sunday, July 9, 1933. Through those initial meetings he was forced to prove himself against particular individuals who attended for the sole purpose of stirring up trouble, making visiting ministers look foolish. But Herbert Armstrong was different, and he successfully weathered these attacks, proving not only the strength of his doctrinal understanding compared to others, but also the ability to think on his feet and to "convince the gainsayers" in a public forum. The result was a nucleus of local attendees that became the foundation of the Radio Church of God.

Controversy Over Baptizing Pork-Eaters

At the same time, Mr. Armstrong was still dealing with complications from his association with the Oregon Conference. Other men with personal agendas continued to accuse and to undermine him, keeping Mr. Armstrong in a defensive posture. The flashpoint centered around the requirements for baptism. Here is how Mr. Armstrong described it:

At this meeting with Mr. Ray and Mr. Oberg, they strenuously objected to my baptizing new converts *before* I had preached to them against pork, and had evidence they had given it up. I knew that Messrs. Oberg and Ray intended to use this against me in the business meeting, as their latest trap to get me ousted from the payroll.

I must repeat that I was receiving a salary of \$3 per week! The farmer members provided my family in Salem with a certain amount of food, in addition to the salary (p. 488).

In what Mr. Armstrong called the "all-day wrangle," he was forced to defend the fact that he was not making the eating of pork a "test" for baptism. Here was his rationale at the time, which is very revealing in comparison to the policy used decades later in the Worldwide Church of God:

Since people cannot fully comprehend the truth of the Commandments and the teaching of the Bible until AFTER they receive the Holy Spirit, and since there is no promise God will give the Holy Spirit until after baptism, therefore I baptized them after repentance and faith, just as the Bible instructs — and *then*, after laying on hands with prayer for their receiving of the Holy Spirit (Acts 8:12, 14–17; Acts 19:5–6; I Tim. 4:14; II Tim. 1:6, etc.), I taught them God's Commandments, and not to eat unclean meats, etc. Every convert I had ever baptized had obeyed all the truths as soon as I taught them. They were submissive, teachable, yielded to God, hungry for His truth. The KNOWLEDGE of the Lord is something to teach *converted* people whose minds are opened by God's Spirit. We must continually GROW in this knowledge (p. 491).

Ironically, over the next thirty years within the Radio Church of God, this philosophy morphed into something very similar to that of the old Oregon Conference, with ministers requiring potential members to state that they were not eating pork, not smoking, etc., before being baptized. By the 1970s, it became *even more stringent*, requiring demonstration of many "spiritual fruits" before even being invited to attend a Sabbath service, let alone becoming baptized! It is just one more way that the history of Mr. Armstrong's thinking from the early years will be contrasted with that which emerged once that physical church grew in scope and power.

Mr. Armstrong's refusal to depart from this philosophy about baptism in 1933 created a furor among the other Oregon Conference ministers, and they sought to force him to follow their policy. Mr. Armstrong refused to be manipulated. This is how he responded:

... They immediately offered a resolution that I be required, if I remained in the conference, to baptize people their way instead of the Scriptural way, and those remaining inside the church building were swayed into voting for it. ...

As soon as I heard of the action taken, I immediately wrote a letter cancelling the \$3 per week salary, and suggesting they give it to Messrs. Oberg and Ray or else throw it in the Pacific Ocean! I did not resign from the Conference, nor was I put out. But I refused further salary.

My wife was in complete accord with me (p. 492).

This event effectively *set him free* to begin devoting his attentions to the new little flock solidifying outside of Eugene, Oregon, which was growing slowly but surely and showing more serious appreciation for his approach to God's truth. It was still very meager, with only about twenty firm members after six weeks of Bible studies in the Firbutte schoolhouse. It required a true act of faith on the part of both Mr. and Mrs. Armstrong to stick to their convictions without evidence of any significant physical support:

My wife and I *knew* we were obeying and serving God. We *knew* He was using us. The FRUITS being borne were loud testimony of this. God had prepared us for relying solely on Him by many miraculous answers to prayer. Therefore we *knew*, in perfect faith, God would supply our need (p. 492).

The Very First Radio Broadcast

The opportunity for Herbert Armstrong to take his religious message to a much broader audience *appeared* to happen quite by accident. It was never premeditated on his part to try to utilize anything but print media to advertize the gospel. But this is what occurred:

In September — *very* soon after rejecting a salary and being controlled and muzzled by MEN, the living Christ began opening doors for the MASS-proclaiming of His Gospel. It was then that someone brought to my attention the fact that the local radio station at Eugene, KORE, then the very smallest minimum-power of 100 watts, had a Morning Devotional program scheduled, but that they were having difficulty getting local ministers to conduct the program. It was free time, carried by the station as a public service sustaining program of 15 minutes, 7:45 to 8:00 A.M.

Immediately I went to the radio station. A woman secretary told me she felt sure they would be glad to have me take the program for a week. I was to call back later for the exact date.

On my second call I was assigned the week of October 9th.

October 9th was surely a great big day in my life — the day of my very first experience before a microphone, *ON THE AIR!* (p. 495)

Even from his first awkward and novice presentation behind a microphone, that short radio program immediately began generating letters to the station. This prompted the station owner to propose a permanent, thirty-minute program on Sunday mornings, at a reduced cost of \$2.50 per half-hour. Even though that was still a fortune to the Armstrongs—given their severe financial challenges—in faith they accepted the proposal:

But, \$2.50 every week! WOW! That was almost as much as my entire salary had been! And I had just previously renounced even that small salary! . . .

Yet I knew this was GOD's WORK, not mine. I was only an instrument. God had promised to supply every need.

God had OPENED THE DOOR OF MASS EVANGELISM!

He had opened the first radio door (Rev. 3:8). I knew He wanted us to walk through that door. I knew He would somehow supply that \$2.50 every

week. I knew also that we had to do our part, not lie down, do nothing, and expect God to do it without any effort from us (p. 497).

At the very same time that this new radio experiment was percolating, something else very significant was occurring as well. Mr. Armstrong and his local core of supporters were finalizing plans to formalize their association into a registered church:

Then, October 21st, at the home of Mr. and Mrs. Ed Smith, just across the road from the Jeans school, 4 miles west of Firbutte, a new Church of God was organized, with Mr. E. E. Fisher as deacon, and myself as pastor. Meetings continued from that date, three times a week, Tuesday and Thursday evenings, and Sabbath afternoons. Attendance was averaging 22. A first action of the new Church was the decision of whether to go ahead with the broadcast. They all approved it joyfully as an effective evangelistic activity of the Church (p. 498).

The fact that this new church organization was being formalized at the very same time that the radio program was being developed certainly influenced the selection of the group name. During the first two to three years, the format of the radio program was actually a fully-condensed church service, including music and an opening prayer. Therefore, it makes perfect sense that in the fall of 1933, the group would be named the Radio Church of God (p. 508).

Birth of *The Plain Truth* Magazine

The new half-hour radio program on Sunday mornings was contracted to begin in the new calendar year, 1934. But in preparing for this debut, Mr. Armstrong felt compelled to address another priority at the same time. The end goal was not just to "be on the radio." He truly saw this radio program as *a tool* to accomplish something more profound. To him, it was always about proclaiming the true Gospel of Jesus Christ and providing a means for the called of God *to respond and to embrace that way of life*. He believed it himself and sought to live it. He wanted others to have the knowledge that God had shown to him, and likewise to have the blessings of that true way and the hope of a glorious future.

Therefore, the approaching debut of the new radio program inspired him to develop another significant program to work in concert with it. That new program was *The Plain Truth* magazine. Here is how Mr. Armstrong spoke of its origin:

Not only did I set out with a will to produce the radio program, but I realized there must be follow-up (and I do not mean money-soliciting follow-up) if this new effort were to be resultful.

Immediately the idea came of realizing, at last, the dream I had cherished since 1927 — the publication of a magazine, to be called *The PLAIN TRUTH*. Back in 1927 I had made up an entire "dummy" of this proposed magazine. I had even written articles for it. . . .

This ambition to publish *The PLAIN TRUTH* was the natural outgrowth of earlier business experience. Much of my 20 years of advertising experience had been spent in the class magazine field.

Now, at last, I realized that this magazine was a "*must*" as a follow-up for the radio broadcast. . . .

My idea for this magazine, from the start, had been to publish a magazine, *not* for church members, but for the general public — the unconverted and unchurched — an evangelistic-type publication to bring to the world God's TRUTH — making it PLAIN! (pp. 506–507)

An additional part of his strategy for follow-up was to continue those personal, local evangelistic meetings, to reinforce the teachings which would be proclaimed on radio and in print media:

Also, I saw at once that the broadcasts should be followed up by continued public evangelistic services.

Therefore, I wrote to the small number of members on the mailing list I had — perhaps less than 50 — the news of the forthcoming THREE-POINT CAMPAIGN: (1) The half-hour Sunday radio program; (2) the new mimeographed magazine for interested listeners, *The PLAIN TRUTH*, and (3) personal public meetings (p. 507).

The problem was, not only was there no immediate funding for the radio program, but neither was their funding for the new magazine. Yet Mr-s. Armstrong decided, with the support of the brethren, to step out in faith and to launch this aggressive three-point campaign, trusting that God would provide the means for its success.

The Official Launch

On the first Sunday of 1934 (January 7), the *World Tomorrow* broadcast went on the air for the first time. Here is Mr. Armstrong's account of the initial response to that broadcast, as well as the launching of the first issue of *The Plain Truth*:

Just as the 15-minute morning devotional programs had brought an unexpected mail response, so did the half-hour regular program of our own. Only

it now brought a larger response. I began with the first broadcast, that first Sunday in 1934, inviting listeners to write in for the new magazine, *The PLAIN TRUTH*.

At the same time I began work on producing Volume I and Number 1 of this magazine of my dreams. I did not even have a "scope" for hand-lettering the headlines. Neither did I have the regular mimeograph lettering guides for tracing, with the stylus, larger headlines. I was still living with the Fishers on their farm seven miles west of Eugene — my wife and children still at the Hall Street house in Salem. . . . That first issue of *The PLAIN TRUTH* was a pretty amateurish, homemade looking sort of thing. . . .

It was some time later, in 1934, that a few special offerings made it possible for us to purchase a very old, used, outdated Neostyle. It was a predecessor to the mimeograph. It was entirely hand operated. . . . We had also finally been able, before the first issue of *The PLAIN TRUTH*, to raise enough money to purchase a secondhand typewriter for \$10.

And so finally *The PLAIN TRUTH*, homemade at Fisher's farm on the Neostyle, but containing priceless plain TRUTH, made its humble bow to the world February 1, 1934 (pp. 509–510).

This summarizes the early life and times of Mr-s. Herbert Armstrong, up through the initial launch of that very humble evangelistic work which would thereafter revolutionize the concept of Christianity in the twentieth century.

In the next installment, we will continue with a summary of those events resulting from the unexpected and persistent growth of that little work in Oregon's Willamette Valley.

Yours with much appreciation and devotion,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Jon W. Brisby". The signature is fluid and elegant, with a long, sweeping underline that extends to the right.

Jon W. Brisby