

Perhaps the most traumatic change came in late 1994: Tkach showed from the Bible that Christians do not have to keep old covenant laws such as the weekly and annual Sabbaths.

Many members did not accept these changes. After many years of understanding their identity as Christians in terms of keeping these laws, they could not accept the idea that it wasn't essential. Thousands of members left, income dropped sharply, and hundreds of employees were laid off.

However, many members, after studying to understand the doctrinal change, began to experience a new sense of peace and joy through a renewed faith in Jesus Christ. There was a new interest in worship.

In 1995, Joseph Tkach Sr. died after a brief battle with cancer. He designated his son, Joe, as the next leader. To correspond with the doctrinal and administrative changes, the denomination changed its name in 2009 to Grace Communion International. Our denomination is now less than half the size it used to be.

At a Crossroads

In some ways, we began like Saul of Tarsus, who was eager to serve God, but who unwittingly persecuted his people. But Christ transformed him into a preacher of grace. God had great plans for Paul, but it took many years for those plans to be implemented.

We do not have any delusions that we will be as great as the apostle Paul, or that we will transform the church like Paul did. But we do expect God to use us to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ. We do not know

exactly how God will use us, but we want to remain ready to respond to his leading.

Jesus Christ has bought and paid for this church. It belongs to him, and we have told him that he can have it! If it is of any value to him, he can use it as his instrument, and we are happy to let him lead us. We rejoice in the fellowship we have with him, and we believe that he is already leading us into usefulness.

Our strengths as a denomination include a high respect for Scripture and a willingness to do what it says. We recognize that Jesus, as our Savior and as our Lord, teaches us how we should think and live. Christ transforms our lives in this age, as well as giving us eternal life. We have also stressed prayer and study as important aspects of spiritual growth. Our recent history gives us an appreciation for God's grace.

Of course, the story is not yet over. Jesus is not done with us yet. We are still being shaped and fashioned for his purpose. We praise him and worship him, and seek to know his will for our lives.

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Transformed by Christ

A Brief History of Grace Communion International

Jesus Christ changes lives. He can change an organization, too. This is the story of how the Lord changed us.

The story involves both pain and joy. Many thousands of members left the church, and our income has fallen dramatically. But thousands of other members are rejoicing with renewed zeal for their Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

A Brief History of Our Growth

The story begins in Oregon, in the 1920s. Herbert Armstrong, a newspaper advertising designer, accepted Jesus Christ as his Lord and Savior. He described it like this:

“Jesus Christ had bought and paid for my life by His death. It really belonged to Him, and now I told Him He could have it! From then on, this defeated no-good life of mine was God’s. I didn’t see how it could be worth anything to Him. But it was His to use....

“In surrendering to God in complete repentance, I found unspeakable joy in accepting Jesus Christ as personal Savior and my present High Priest.... I began to realize a new fellowship and friendship had come into my life. I began to be conscious of a contact and fellowship with Christ, and with God the Father.

“When I read and studied the Bible, God was talking to me, and now I loved to listen! I began to pray, and knew that in prayer I was talking with God. I was not yet very well acquainted with God. But one gets to be better acquainted with another by constant contact and continuous conversation. So I continued in the study of the Bible. I began to write, in article form, the things I was learning.”

Herbert Armstrong eventually began to preach and to lead others. In the early 1930s, he started a radio program and a magazine. With advertising flair, he created interest in various doctrines by teaching things that other preachers did not.

He persuaded a few people that traditional churches were wrong, and that he had the truth. The ministry gradually grew along the West Coast. In 1947, he moved to Pasadena,

California, to have better access to radio stations. He began Ambassador College, to train leaders for the church. The ministry continued to grow.

The people who responded to the radio program were scattered throughout the United States and Canada. Graduates of Ambassador College were sent to various cities to gather the believers into churches. The church expanded into other nations in the 1950s and 1960s.

The growth began to slow in the 1970s, and slow growth continued until Herbert Armstrong died in 1986. He left a denomination of more than 100,000 people, with a large magazine and television ministry.

Unorthodox Doctrines

Many of Armstrong’s teachings, although interesting, were seriously in error. He began with a good foundation: a belief in the Bible, and a belief that salvation is possible only through Jesus Christ. He had a high respect for Scripture. If the Bible said it, he was willing to do it. “Don’t believe me,” he often said, “believe the Bible. Blow the dust off your own Bible, and read what it says.”

However, Armstrong did not have any formal theological training. He did not always know how to understand the Bible. He rejected the doctrine of the Trinity, for example, because he could not see that the Bible supported it.

Armstrong saw in the Bible that God told his people to keep the seventh-day Sabbath, and no one could prove to him that God authorized a change in this commandment. Armstrong therefore felt that he had to choose between the Bible and tradition, and he chose the Bible.

Armstrong knew that Christians should obey God. However, he overemphasized the law, and underemphasized the grace God has given us in Jesus Christ.

Armstrong also had some unusual ideas about prophecy. He believed that the United States and Britain are descendants of the “lost” ten tribes of Israel, and that many biblical prophecies apply to the Anglo-Saxon peoples. The Great Tribulation would soon start, he warned repeatedly, but the good news is that Christ will soon return, bringing salvation and peace to all nations.

A Decade of Painful Change

Part of this doctrinal foundation was faulty. And yet part of it was true. Under Armstrong’s teachings, many people came to Christ, accepted his death for their sins, and trusted in him for salvation. Many lives were transformed from sin and selfishness, to service and humility.

In 1986, shortly before he died, Herbert Armstrong appointed Joseph Tkach (pronounced Ta-cotch) to be his successor. In 1988, Tkach made minor doctrinal changes. He taught that Christians could go to doctors and take medicines without indicating a lack of faith in God.

In 1990, more doctrinal changes were made. The message of the church became focused on salvation through Jesus Christ, rather than emphasizing prophecy and law. Tkach felt he had to choose between Bible and tradition, and he chose the Bible. But not everyone agreed. Membership, attendance, and income began to decrease slowly.

In 1993, the church accepted the doctrine of the Trinity and made other changes. Each change attacked strongly held beliefs about how we ought to express our devotion to God. Each change had to be explained from the Scriptures and had to show how previous explanations were wrong.