



Forty Years Ago: California Attacks God's Church

What we can learn from this massive attack on religious freedom

- Stephen Flurry
- [21-01-2019](#)

It was a dramatic David-versus-Goliath clash! The battlefield: Pasadena, California. The time frame: 40 years ago this month.

On Jan. 3, 1979, Judge Steven Weisman marched into Worldwide Church of God (wgcg) headquarters in Pasadena, California, declared that he had “fired” its pastor general, Herbert W. Armstrong, and claimed to now be in control of the Church.

Weisman’s unconstitutional invasion had the legal backing of the state of California’s attorney general’s office. It had been instigated by a cabal of former Church members intent on taking over the Church.

In June 1978, Mr. Armstrong had disfellowshipped his son Garner Ted Armstrong from the Church. In the six months that followed, several former Church members, led by Garner Ted, devised a wicked conspiracy against the Church in the form of a class action lawsuit. The lawsuit alleged that Mr. Armstrong and his assistant Stanley Rader were mismanaging Church funds, siphoning off millions of dollars for their personal use, and leaving the Church in a financial crisis. After a secret court hearing based on these unfounded allegations, California Judge Julius Title put the Church into receivership and appointed Weisman as the receiver of the organization, responsible for *controlling* it while the state investigated its financial records.

But the real issue in this case wasn’t finances. California Attorney General George Deukmejian argued that since the Church was a nonprofit organization, it was subject to the state’s charitable-trust law—meaning that the state of California had ultimate authority over Church assets. Under this reasoning, any church could have its assets taken over by the state.

Mr. Armstrong countered that this was *God’s Church*, headed by the living Jesus Christ. He also argued that according to the Constitution of the United States, the state could not legally intervene in religious matters in this way. According to a special March 1979 *World Tomorrow* program (Mr. Armstrong’s flagship tv program) about the receivership, the attorney general’s office “contended that California state law requires that the Worldwide Church of God hold membership votes on matters affecting the governing of the Church. Or in other words, the Church must be essentially *democratic* in structure.”

The key disagreement was over church government. In that program, announcer Art Gilmore interviewed Mr. Armstrong about the lawsuit:

Gilmore: “Mr. Armstrong, do you feel that the Church government, or Church rule, is the real issue in this lawsuit?”

Armstrong: “Yes, I’m sure that’s the main issue. Everything else is merely a trumped up ‘something.’ The ridiculousness of saying that Mr. Rader and I had siphoned off millions of dollars every year ... *that was merely an excuse*. ... But the real issue has now surfaced.”

The doctrine of Church government is a religious matter that the state has absolutely no jurisdiction over. The United States Constitution prohibits the federal government from establishing any religion or prohibiting anyone’s free exercise of their religion. Thomas Jefferson assured Connecticut Baptists that “religion is a matter which lies solely between man and his God” and that the First Amendment built “a wall of separation between church and state.” Any state law or action that

interferes with church doctrine is inherently unconstitutional. In that program, Mr. Armstrong flatly denied the state's claims that the wgc should be democratic, stating emphatically, "God's government is not democracy."

Weisman thought that the Church members would welcome him as a savior. Instead, they fought back against his intrusion into their religious beliefs. He didn't expect Mr. Armstrong to fight back either, but as Rader wrote in his book *Against the Gates of Hell*: "Problems have never upset Mr. Armstrong, and he reacted even to this serious threat with serenity, courage and confidence."

At the time of the receivership, Mr. Armstrong was staying at his home in Tucson, Arizona, recovering from the effects of heart failure in 1977. The fact that Mr. Armstrong was out of state turned out to be a huge advantage because it meant that he could keep the work going even though the receiver had taken over the Pasadena offices.

The plaintiffs in the lawsuit had assured the court that a receivership wouldn't hurt the Church, but as soon as it began, one of the Church's primary banks canceled a crucial million-dollar loan. Many members also stopped sending their tithes and offerings to Pasadena because they didn't want the money to go to the receiver. These factors immediately put the Church into a financial crisis.

On January 4, Mr. Armstrong sent a letter to Church members asking for emergency contributions to deal with the lawsuit. However, the mailing facilities he typically used were in Pasadena. The receiver blocked the Pasadena Post Office from mailing the letter. Then the receiver sent a letter of his own to the ministry worldwide, telling them that if they sent their donations to Tucson instead of Pasadena, they could face legal repercussions!

Mr. Armstrong responded by moving most of the headquarters mail processing department to Tucson to deal with the mail, tithes and offerings. Then he instructed the brethren to stop sending donations to Pasadena and instead to send them directly to Tucson, addressed to him personally. That way, the receiver could lay no claim to the money, since the checks were not made out to the Worldwide Church of God.

On January 5, the lawsuit was heard in court, and no financial misconduct was found. The court ordered that all records be returned to the Church. However, the investigation continued, and the receiver remained in place.

After the January 5 victory, Mr. Armstrong wrote: "Our Great God is still on His throne! God has given His work a tremendous victory against the most monstrous conspiracy and attack Satan ever launched against God's work!"

God was backing His servant! Mr. Armstrong was not going to take this attack lying down—he went on the offensive! However, the war was not over yet. He wrote in a co-worker letter on January 18:

I thought on January 7, when I wrote you, that God had then given us the victory in this decisive life-and-death assault against Almighty God, Jesus Christ and God's Church. ... No evidence of any wrongdoing or justification for this monstrous outrage against God's work has been found against us. Yet this case hangs on. ... We have been put in the position of fighting the battle of freedom of religion from the state, not only for ourselves—but for all churches and religions.

Many other churches and religions stepped forward in solidarity with God's Church. They realized that if this case was allowed to stand, no church would be safe from state interference. Mr. Armstrong wrote, "I have heard of even Roman Catholic priests or higher-ranked clergy and Seventh-Day Adventists, rallying behind me in this crisis. For if we should lose this court battle, no church—no religion would be safe from political powers!"

In his January 18 letter, Mr. Armstrong called a church-wide fast for January 27. He encouraged the Church to turn to God in fasting and prayer for deliverance from this crisis.

God's people responded to this attack with fervent prayers and bold action! On January 22, about 3,000 Church members, without being urged by any Church leaders, spontaneously descended upon the Pasadena campus. They came from all over California—even other states. They were there to stage a sit-in in the Hall of Administration, Ambassador Auditorium, the Student Center and other campus buildings. They brought food and bedding with them. They were prepared to stay in the buildings for weeks if they had to. The God-fearing crowd was composed of old and young, from nursing infants to elderly members.

That morning, some ministers organized a church service in the Hall of Administration. Since they were holding a religious observance on their own private property, these members *locked the doors*—and when the court-appointed receiver showed up for work, he couldn't get in! This was a spontaneous demonstration by the brethren of God of their unwavering support for Mr. Armstrong and their dedication to their God and His Church.

When Mr. Armstrong heard what was happening, he called from Tucson and addressed those gathered at the Pasadena campus. He thanked the brethren for their show of support and told them, "The people of God have always been willing to suffer whatever they have to do for the living God! And I tell you, this has drawn us together." He told the brethren to make sure they were subject to the laws of the land, as Christ admonished the disciples in the Gospels—but as it says in Acts, to obey God rather than man. Mr. Armstrong, who was in his late 80s at the time and still recovering from a serious illness, said: "If we have to begin to suffer the persecution of being thrown in prison, I will be the first to go ... God is fighting this battle for us, and God is stronger than man!"

That evening, a headline in the *Los Angeles Times* read, "Ready for Jail—Armstrong."

The movement seemed to feed off itself. More and more brethren showed up, bringing food, blankets and homework for their school-age children. By January 24, there were about 5,500 brethren in the Church buildings.

Weisman was furious. He secured a court order authorizing the use of force if necessary to get into the buildings. That day, police forces massed just outside the Pasadena campus, ready to take the buildings by force and jail thousands of Church members. Mr. Armstrong wrote on January 28:

If arrested, our brethren would not have resisted. At all times they behaved like God's people, orderly, neat, polite. Many people outside our membership have noticed this and commented on it.

At one point, the brethren even brought a hot meal over to the sheriff's deputies who were massed outside the campus gates, showing an example of true Christian charity.

By this point, the Pasadena standoff was national news. Weisman recognized that if he used force to arrest hundreds of peaceful religious protesters, it would be extraordinarily bad publicity, especially if any members were harmed in the process. So he called Mr. Rader seeking a compromise. Rader refused. Finally, the receiver agreed to stay off campus and check Church records in an office nearby.

Mr. Armstrong said in that 1979 *World Tomorrow* program:

Now they thought we would cave in. They didn't realize the scope of our work. They didn't realize its size. They didn't realize another thing—the absolute integrity and loyalty of our membership. And they will see that money gets to me to carry out what God wants done, no matter what man does.

The receiver and his fellows thought that the Worldwide Church of God was just a church led by a senile old man. They expected its members to submit to the receiver—but they completely underestimated God's people.

One of the lawsuit's crucial claims was that Mr. Armstrong was becoming senile and vulnerable to manipulation by Rader and others. Mr. Armstrong destroyed that allegation in an April 1979 co-worker letter:

Am I too old? Am I "senile"? Who else do you know at near 87 years of age who in one year turns God's Worldwide Church around, rooting out the dissidents, the false doctrines, being used of God to set His Church back on His track? It is not I who does it—it is God using me as His instrument. God brought me back to life from complete heart failure and death, in August 1977, for a purpose. ... God's work is going forward now, as never before in spite of persecution!

In a February 1979 co-worker letter, Mr. Armstrong wrote, "This monstrous invasion of the state of California will go down in history for the next thousand years!" He then explained another way that the Church was fighting back against the receivership: through full-page ads in several major newspapers. Mr. Armstrong used his advertising and writing skills to create impactful ads that exposed the unconstitutional attack on God's Church. He wrote in one of the ads: "During the two-months term of the receivership the Church has lost \$5.3 million in working capital. In addition, normal bank credit lines were curtailed and \$1.3 million in demand notes were called. ... The first six weeks saw almost daily press, radio and tv coverage emphasizing the allegations rather than the facts. ... This resulted in irreparable damage to the Church's moral reputation and its civic and legal credibility."

Rader wrote in *Against the Gates of Hell*:

The damage that appointment of a receiver can do to any organization, and most especially a church, cannot be overestimated. It is as though a perfectly respectable individual were falsely arrested on a charge of sexual misconduct. Until the accused can prove his innocence through the laborious machinery of the law, a reputation built up layer by layer over the years has been blackened and virtually destroyed.

Sensational news travels fast and merits black headlines and prime spots on the evening news. If an accusation is made, the vast majority of readers and viewers tend to accept it.

In the case of a receivership, moreover, the presumption of guilt created by the court's order is powerful. Few people ask: What is the other side's case? Rather, they infer that if the court has been forced to act, something very serious must be afoot.

In just two days we were to reap the first bitter fruits. Headlines throughout the country trumpeted the news that a church was being rocked by a financial scandal so massive, so shocking that the state of California had been forced to step in. And if people missed the headlines, they heard and saw it on television. Camera crews and newsmen descended on the Church in droves.

The name of the Worldwide Church was being blackened before it had been given a chance to say a word in its defense.

There was no evidence of a crime, just scandalous allegations. The state came in *looking for a crime* to prosecute Mr. Armstrong for. That is eerily similar to what is happening in American politics today. When an investigation begins, most people assume that there is something seriously wrong, because they trust that the investigators would only be involved if there is some sort of evidence of wrongdoing.

The bad press seriously damaged the reputation of God's Church. But Mr. Armstrong said in a March 12, 1979, sermon:

“God’s people always have suffered persecution. Now this world is Satan’s world. And the persecution is always instituted from Satan. He hates God’s people. He hates God’s truth. He doesn’t want us to believe it. And yet, Satan himself can do only what God allows. Now that means that this persecution could not have come on us if God had not allowed it.”

God allowed this persecution, and it actually turned out to be a great blessing for God’s Church. It unified the brethren with each other and with God.

After the receiver saw that the Church was not going to back down, he eventually resigned. On March 12, Judge Title appointed another receiver. By mid-March, however, the California Attorney General’s Office realized that it had massively overstepped its bounds.

On March 16, the judge recognized the Church’s right to appeal the receivership and accepted a bond signed by individual members guaranteeing \$2.4 million in surety, in lieu of cash. The Church posted another \$1.3 million bond on March 19. The Church gathered this money by informing the entire Church of the situation, asking for emergency donations. They pledged money from their savings and even put houses and cars up for sale to provide the money needed to get the receiver out and protect God’s work.

In a sermon to the youth at the Summer Educational Program in July 1979, Mr. Armstrong said: “This is a case of where government is the villain and is doing the wrong thing. And we’re not going to let them get away with it—we’re not. They would like to get off the hook right now. They realize that they attacked the wrong people. They know now they made a great mistake and they’d like to get off the hook, so to speak, but we’re not going to let them off the hook. And they are going to rue the day they ever started trying to destroy the work and the Church of the living God. Because that is what they did. [audience applause]”

On Oct. 4, 1980, the state of California officially dropped the lawsuit. Soon after, the California state legislature passed a law that barred the attorney general from investigating a religious organization the way they had investigated the Worldwide Church of God.

God’s Church won! Satan and his workers were defeated.

In this anniversary month, it’s worth reviewing this history and remembering the important lessons we can learn from it. If you have access to Mr. Armstrong’s co-worker letters from 1979 to 1980, I suggest rereading them. You will be inspired by how God’s Church fought back against Satan’s attack. The gripping story is also told in great detail in Stanley Rader’s *Against the Gates of Hell*, which you can find online.

In his book, Rader wrote about the way Mr. Armstrong responded to the attack:

Over the years of my close association with this remarkable man, I have noted abundant evidence that he is the embodiment of his own message of hope and trust that the living God will provide man with the wisdom to prevail over obstacles. “No matter how intelligent, alert or resourceful you may be,” he has written, “you need God’s wisdom and help in solving the constant problems and meeting the recurring obstacles that beset life’s path, whether it is in business, a profession, private life or what. The man who has contact with God, who can take these matters—these emergencies—these problems—in the quietness of his private prayer room to the throne of grace and seek God’s counsel and advice is going to have divine guidance. Wisdom comes from God.”

I am certain that Mr. Armstrong took this grave emergency into the “quietness of his private prayer room to the throne of grace,” sought God’s counsel, and knew that justice and truth would ultimately prevail.

Mr. Armstrong went to God. That is where the battle is won—on our knees before God’s throne room. When we face Satan’s attacks, persecutions, scurrilous accusations and false witnesses, our response should be to go to the great God of the universe and cry out to Him for wisdom, strength and deliverance.

God’s people should not be surprised when we face persecution. Jesus Christ told us that we would be persecuted. He said in John 16:2-3: “[Y]ea, the time cometh, that *whosoever killeth you will think that he doeth God service*. And these things will they do unto you, because they have not known the Father, nor me.”

The devil is always trying to destroy the Work of God. Satan is the *accuser of the brethren!* (Revelation 12:12). God’s Church is his biggest target.

Satan can easily raise up false witnesses against us. That is exactly what he did after Judas betrayed Jesus Christ. Matthew 26:59 records that the chief priests and Jewish leaders “sought false witnesses against Jesus, to put him to death.” This is the way Satan operates. He uses false witnesses and slanderous allegations, hoping to take down the servants of God.

Mr. Armstrong wrote in a May 1972 co-worker letter:

Co-workers, this wouldn’t be the very work of God unless it was being persecuted! Our persecutors themselves prove this is the very work of God! We do not invite persecution. We try to avoid it. But the living Christ and your Bible says we will get persecution and false accusation. In this world, we have to expect, at the best, careless journalism and, at the worst, irresponsible journalism.

That was almost 50 years ago—and look at the state of journalism today! We should expect nothing less in this end time.

True Christians are not of the world; God calls them *out* of the world. In John 17:14, Christ said about His disciples: "I have given them thy word; and the world hath hated them, because *they are not of the world* even as I am not of the world." 2 Timothy 3:10 tells us that "all that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution." But 2 Timothy 1:12 tells us that if we suffer with Christ, we will also reign with Him.

The Bible doesn't promise a smooth and easy life for true Christians: "Many are the afflictions of the righteous: but the Lord delivereth him out of them all" (Psalm 34:19). Acts 14:22 says we must through *much* tribulation enter the Kingdom of God. Of course, we don't want to bring persecution on ourselves by unwise actions, but we also must know that persecution is part of the Christian life.

Why did God allow the state of California to attack God's Church in 1979? Mr. Armstrong wrote: "God has allowed Satan to bring this upon us. First, to wake us up spiritually and to bring us back closer to God, and second, to draw us closer together, and third, to sift out from our midst some of the chaff from the wheat."

After this attack on God's Church, God poured out overwhelming blessings on the Church. Mr. Armstrong wrote on the one-year anniversary of the receivership:

One year ago today, Satan launched his most devastating attempt to *DESTROY* this work of the living God I want to tell you the real significance of that massive attack by the attorney general's office of the state of California—and how God has spared this work and kept it going—and growing! ...

Actually, God has blessed us so that the income for carrying on the work of God has continued, and has shown enough increase through 1979 to offset inflation.

I have been able to carry on this past year, personally, at age 87, evangelistic meetings in two points in Africa, the Middle East, Japan, and just recently—in December—I was the first and only church leader from the Christian world to be invited, as guest of the government of the Communist People's Republic of China. ...

So the living Jesus Christ has protected God's work completely and given it great advances, in spite of the state's attack.

Mr. Armstrong showed us a remarkable example of how to respond to persecution. The first thing we must do is *turn to God* and make sure we are on track spiritually. He said in that 1979 *World Tomorrow* program: "The first thing I begin to ask is, Where am I wrong? Where is the Church wrong? What have we done that God allows this thing to come on us? ... [T]his could not have happened if God did not allow it."

This is a hugely valuable lesson. Mr. Armstrong was ready to stand up against Satan's attack and take action. But first, he humbly turned to God. He looked at himself and the Church and went to God for answers and direction: *God, show us what we need to learn. Help us to understand why we are going through this trial, so that we can learn the lessons that we need to learn from it.*

Mr. Armstrong said in a 1980 sermon: "It's time to wake up and get back and know what is being told us in the Word of God, and ... get on our knees a little bit more, and get a little bit closer to God and get a little bit farther away from the cares and the enjoyments and the pleasures of this world."

That is how we will endure coming persecution: by drawing closer to God! If we are close to the living God, then we will be able to face any obstacle, knowing and believing in trusting faith that God will give us the victory. Like Mr. Armstrong, we must take grave emergencies to the quietness of our private prayer rooms, seek God's counsel, and *know* that justice and truth will ultimately prevail.

Let us never forget this incredible history and the foundational lessons it teaches us.

To understand more about what happened to the Worldwide Church of God after Mr. Armstrong died, please request your free copy of [Raising the Ruins](#). This book explains the history of the Church, how its members eventually forsook everything that they had fought for in 1979, and how that led to the beginning of the Philadelphia Church of God, which follows in the footsteps of Herbert W. Armstrong. ■