

Commentary — From the Margins *Garner Ted Armstrong*

Gifted, talented, autocratic, Garner Ted Armstrong died this week. His death completed a classic tragedy in which a royal character's strengths become the character's undoing. His strengths were the quality of his voice, his ability to speak without notes and without preparation, and his knowledge of Scripture. His undoing wasn't the rumored philandering, or even his insubordination to his father. Rather, it was his inability to correct a forty-year-old mistake.

I confessed privately to Garner Ted a year ago that I questioned whether he was ever drawn by God the Father. I here confess publicly: in 1983, in Anchorage, Alaska, I stood in Earl Roemer's driveway and asked Earl, then a pastor for the Worldwide Church of God, if he thought GTA had ever been converted. His answer was, yes, but he added that he hadn't seen the evidence of conversion since 1972. I saw that evidence of conversion the summer of 2001. I spoke to GTA, told him it had been a long time since I sat behind him at Squaw Valley in 1973. He agreed that 1973 was, indeed, a long time ago.

The man I spoke with in 2001 wasn't the arrogant heir-apparent to Herbert Armstrong's theological empire who tramped into Blithe Arena with his entourage after services' opening prayer and left in the same manner before the closing prayer in 1973. Instead, he was a humble man, wearing an off-the-rack suit and interested in speaking with lay members. He acknowledged in his sermon that he was a flawed messenger, but said that his flaws didn't affect the message: Christ would shortly return to rule as King of kings. Everything he said was correct. And he was still the best speaker within the splintered churches of God.

Instead of arrogant, Garner Ted Armstrong was eloquent when he spoke in Marion, Illinois, the summer of 2001. My doubts about him dissipated. Whereas thirty years earlier he had seemed like a slick used car salesman to me, had seemed like a spoiled superstar who had been gifted by God, when I spoke with him in Marion, none of those negative qualities were apparent. He had continued to teach the gospel of Christ's soon-coming reign as he understood that gospel even though he was the disfellowshipped son of Herbert W. Armstrong, and had himself taught that work of his father was the only true work of God. He had confronted theological shunning, financial setbacks, and being removed from the leadership of the church he began when disfellowshipped. He had survived each of these trials, apparently becoming spiritually stronger through adversity. While only Christ judges saints, I strongly suspect GTA will be in the first resurrection. The tragedy is that he never fulfilled his potential.

I have told the following story in *A Philadelphia Apologetic*; I will summarize it here. In 1961, Herbert Armstrong realized that something was amiss with his prophetic understanding. He scheduled an Advanced Prophecy Seminar at Ambassador College, Pasadena, for the spring 1962 semester. All of the senior men of WCG then in Pasadena were in the seminar, and Mr. Armstrong taught the first session. He told the senior men what was troubling him, said that they had to get prophecy right, and asked that these

men explore any and all ideas and concepts that might improve the church's understanding of prophecy.

Unfortunately, Herbert Armstrong only taught the first session of that Advanced Prophecy Seminar. Garner Ted took the second session, and began that session by saying there would be no new revelation, that his father was correct in his prophetic understanding, that endtime prophecies were well understood...forty years to the hour and I believe to the minute of when GTA said that *all was known*, I was drafted to explicate prophecy in a manner only a little less striking than the Apostle Paul's induction notice. And I took what I found in prophecy to GTA--as well as this story. His was the job to take the gospel that [*all who endure to the end will be saved*](#) (Matt 24:13) to the world. Unfortunately, to suddenly begin teaching another understanding of prophecy was more admitting error than he could do.

I tried to return to Garner Ted Armstrong the job for which he had been gifted. I am only a relief pitcher. GTA was the starter who was to do the work of the spiritual Nehemiah in conjunction with his father who had been given the work of Ezra, that of rebuilding the temple of God. GTA was to have rebuilt the walls of spiritual Jerusalem, but he took himself out of the game because of a Laodicean attitude. And once he was removed, as in baseball, he couldn't return to the playing field. I didn't know that when I tried to get him back into the game.

Garner Ted Armstrong endured to his end. He was faithful to teach what he knew. And I am actually grateful for the opportunity to play in the theological big leagues. I only wish that my opportunity hadn't come at his expense.

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