

Church of God, The Eternal

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Dear Brethren:

In the aftermath of the crumbling of our parent organization over the past thirty years, members of God's church have responded in many different ways to that resulting upheaval. Some have joined other groups who sprang out of the ruins, while many simply walked away from everything and went back into the world. Still, others—remaining sincere—have not found solace in any organized body, but have still retained a belief in many of those principles taught only by Mr. Herbert Armstrong in this age. Add to them the number of new converts who have come to value those teachings in recent years—though never having had any contact with the original parent body—and we have quite an interesting hodgepodge of current and former believers.

For those still making an attempt to pursue a spiritual calling in that Way today, a kaleidoscope of initiatives can be found. Whereas the first forty years of the Radio Church of God saw one unified body—believing and keeping the same doctrines under the leadership of a harnessed, structured ministry—the subsequent destruction of that cohesive leadership has generated an endless variety of approaches to worship practices today. The principle quoted by Jesus Christ in Matthew 26:31 is certainly true: ". . . smite the shepherd, and the sheep shall be scattered" (Zechariah 13:7). And it was certainly true that once the structure of that parent body was destroyed, the sheep were scattered to the four winds, many of them doing the best they could on their own to make sense of it all, trying to find a way to hold on to those parts they still treasured.

The upshot of very poor personal behavior by many ministers, their refusal to defend cardinal principles of Truth under pressure, and the unwise use of authority in dealing with laymembers, ultimately created a monstrous backlash toward the concept of top-down government in the church, or the need at all for authorized human teachers. The underlying philosophy of many became, "I once naively accepted the authority of a man to speak for God—and I got burned; I never intend to do that again." Thereafter, for the ones who did not throw it all away in disgust, a new philosophy emerged: an appeal to the Bereans as the proper model for *sound* Christian belief.

Who Were the Bereans?

Berea was one of the cities into which the Apostle Paul brought the gospel on his journeys through Asia Minor. Berea was a city in Macedonia (Albania today), about forty-five miles inland from Thessalonica and the coast of the Aegean Sea. Under what circumstances did Paul first go to Berea? To escape persecution at the hands of the leading Jews in Thessalonica:

Now when they had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where was a synagogue of the Jews: And Paul, as his manner was, went in unto them, and three sabbath days reasoned with them out of the scriptures, Opening and alleging, that Christ must needs have suffered, and risen again from the dead; and that this Jesus, whom I preach unto you, is Christ. And some of them believed, and consorted with Paul and Silas; and of the devout Greeks a great multitude, and of the chief women not a few. But the Jews which believed not, moved with envy, took unto them certain lewd fellows of the baser sort, and gathered a company, and set all the city on an uproar, and assaulted the house of Jason, and sought to bring them out to the people. And when they found them not, they drew Jason and certain brethren unto the rulers of the city, crying, These that have turned the world upside down are come hither also; Whom Jason hath received: and these all do contrary to the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, one Jesus. And they troubled the people and the rulers of the city, when they heard these things. And when they had taken security of Jason, and of the other, they let them go. And the brethren immediately sent away Paul and Silas by night unto Berea: who coming thither went into the synagogue of the Jews (Acts 17:1–10).

So after establishing the bare beginnings of a Christian movement in Thessalonica, Paul moved inland to Berea—by God's inspiration—to escape the wrath of these powerful coastal Jews. Once in Berea, he was received much more eagerly by the leading Jews of that city, who accepted his message about Jesus Christ:

These were more noble than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the scriptures daily, whether those things were so. Therefore many of them believed; also of honourable women which were Greeks, and of men, not a few (Acts 17:11–12).

This is virtually the only reference in the New Testament to the people of Berea (other than mention of one of the later disciples who came from that city—Acts 20:4).

The Bereans: Champions of the Independents

Why and how has a people so briefly mentioned in the Bible become the champion of those who resist the need for a ministry in the Church today? Because of *what they did* when Paul first arrived, and how they *proved* that Paul was a legitimate messenger. Notice it again:

These were more noble than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness of mind, *and searched the scriptures daily, whether those things were so . . .* (Acts 17:11) [emphasis mine].

These independent-minded ones of God's church today point to this text to prove that the Bereans did not just accept Paul and his message in blind faith, but put him to the test, verifying what he was teaching from their own copies of the Holy Scripture. We are told by these independents that this proves the people of God are not required to accept anything from a minister as Truth which cannot be certified in black and white from the Bible.

Based upon this interpretation, many have found a way to continue their practice of selected Church of God teachings (to one extent or another), but to remove from prominence the role of the ministry in their spiritual pursuits. According to this philosophy, one *never* has to accept *any teaching* by faith—just because a man said so—but is accountable before God *only for that which the individual can prove to his own satisfaction from the Bible*. This interpretation allows them to neutralize the influence of a presumptuous ministry, which, after all, was admittedly the source of our misery and ultimate calamity in the last-day church. Whereas before, we were naive children, accepting at face value all that the ministry said as gospel—with or without Biblical evidence—now we have become more *spiritually mature*, recognizing that God actually intended for laymembers to retain more power of interpretation and verification to themselves. The idea is that the laity is authorized by God to be a check on the power of the ministry, by holding their feet to the fire if they profess any teaching to be of God which cannot be absolutely certified from a simple reading of the Bible.

Did Herbert Armstrong Support This Interpretation?

Upon this premise, many former members of the Worldwide Church of God have formed their own new doctrine concerning church government. Although this interpretation is not consistent at all with the way the Radio Church of God ever operated during its years of prominence (through the 1960s), they claim adamantly they are only doing what Mr. Armstrong told them to do. After all, it was Mr. Armstrong who said repeatedly over the years, "Don't believe me, believe your Bibles!"

For thirty years, on the air and in The PLAIN TRUTH, I have been saying: "DON'T believe ME -- BELIEVE YOUR BIBLE -- BELIEVE GOD! Always I say . . . "Check up! Listen without prejudice, with open mind, then CHECK UP -- go to your BIBLE, and BELIEVE what you read THERE." . . . If you want to know whether our Message is really the TRUTH, then LOOK TO YOUR OWN BIBLE, for, as Isaiah says, "If they speak not according to this Word, it is because there is no light in them." Check up, as the Bereans did on the Apostle Paul -- they listened with open minds, unprejudiced, then searched the SCRIPTURES, whether these things were so (Acts 17:11). If we proclaim the TRUTH -- if we make it plain and understandable, and lead you to the truth which you PROVE to be the truth, then BELIEVE THAT TRUTH. (Personal From the Editor, *The Plain Truth*, November 1963).

So here is proof that Herbert Armstrong always challenged members of God's Church to accept nothing they could not prove from the Bible themselves, and even invoked the example of the Bereans to confirm the principle! But is that really an accurate assessment of Mr. Armstrong's teachings to *church* members?

To Whom Was Herbert Armstrong Speaking?

When Herbert Armstrong said, "Don't believe me, believe your Bible," to whom was he speaking? Was it to the assembly of baptized members of the Radio Church of God as he taught the weightier matters of the law in weekly Sabbath and Holy Day services? Look again! The quotation above says he had repeated this challenge over the past thirty years—to whom? To those hearing the radio broadcast and receiving *The Plain Truth* magazine—the same ones to whom he was addressing this very *Personal From the Editor*. And who was the primary audience he was trying to reach with those programs? The yet *uncalled masses of the world*, steeped in their false religious concepts which were *easily proven* to be contradictory to the Bible! Is that not to whom *The World Tomorrow* radio broadcast and *The Plain Truth* magazine were targeted? Of course it was!

And in virtually—if not every—case in which he made this challenge not to believe him, but to believe the Bible, what specific kind of doctrine was he addressing? It was what we would now call the most fundamental, simplistic teachings which set Mr. Armstrong's message apart from the world's churches, including repudiation of: the immortality of the soul teaching, belief that the saints go to heaven, that Christ was raised on Sunday morning, that Christmas is a Christian tradition, and that the Sabbath is done away. These are all examples of entrenched teachings which the masses of this world have blindly accepted without recognizing the multitude of contrary Biblical evidences. Notice further a quote from Mr. Armstrong from his *Personal* in the November, 1969, *Plain Truth* issue:

And remember, we never ask our readers to believe what we say or write BECAUSE WE SAY IT. CHECK IT! Believe what you see PROVED! We do!

Was this written to baptized church members? Who was his audience? Here is the paragraph he wrote just prior to the statement above, which makes it very plain:

But UNDERSTAND, please. The PLAIN TRUTH is NOT intended to be a religious publication. It is a SECULAR oriented magazine. But we recognize that the great MISSING DIMENSION in education is knowledge of the true meaning of life -- knowledge of the true values that pay off in your own life -- knowledge of THE WAY that brings you REWARDS and not troubles, unhappiness, pain, suffering, frustrations. It is our purpose to publish those BASICS of right knowledge -- and if we cannot find that knowledge in the fields of science, modern education, human philosophy, sociology, psychology or other popularly recognized sources, but we DO find that PRACTICAL, WORKABLE knowledge in the one Book most seem to be prejudiced against, we are going to disseminate it without apology.

So his intended audience was a secular, nonreligious people—the ones who were either disdainful of religion, or else steeped in all manner of human traditions not supported by the Bible. Mr. Armstrong likewise selected topics for the radio broadcast which did not *seem* religious, i.e. world events, societal problems. Many commented over the years that they listened to Mr. Armstrong on the radio quite a while before they realized they were actually tuned in to a religious evangelist. He was not speaking or writing to them *at all* the way he did to baptized brethren in a Sabbath assembly. Why, and for what reason?

Mr. Armstrong's Teachings to the Church

We need to recognize that Mr. Armstrong instructed the Church—the body of baptized members—very differently than he did his radio and *Plain Truth* audiences, by virtue of the topics he chose to teach. He even created a separate magazine for church members called *The Good News*. And what were the topics he selected to teach the church in his sermons and *Good News* articles? The specifics of required Christian living, including the meatier topics about God's salvation plan, Holy Day observance, tithing, divine healing, prayer, fasting, Bible study, church government, etc. He emphasized the necessity of *absolute faith* to receive the blessings of God's soon-coming Kingdom.

While teaching all of these detailed doctrines—which became part of our well-known Church of God theology—did Mr. Armstrong say in every case, don't believe me, but only

what you can prove in your own Bibles? Hardly! But why not? Because many of those meatier doctrines do not have the same *easy* Biblical substantiation as do others (a number of examples will soon be given). Does this mean Mr. Armstrong was a manipulating hypocrite, enticing new converts into the church on the basis of their personal efforts to prove from the Bible, but then changing the rules once baptized to require blind allegiance? Not at all. As you will see, what we are really talking about is a God-ordained distinction within His total body of law between those doctrines which are easily proven to the casual Bible reader, and certain other teachings that are equally true, but not so clearly proven from a few simple passages.

Milk vs. Strong Meat Doctrines

God made it very plain that He made a distinction in categorizing components of His Truth. Here is proof through the words of a New Testament apostle:

For when for the time ye ought to be teachers, ye have need that one teach you again which be *the first principles* of the oracles of God; and are become such as have need *of milk*, and not *of strong meat*. For every one that useth milk is unskilful in the word of righteousness: for he is a babe. But strong meat belongeth to them that are *of full age*, even those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil (Hebrews 5:12–14) [emphasis mine].

So there are milk doctrines, and there are meat doctrines. What is the difference? The milk doctrines are the most fundamental teachings which set God's Truth apart from the world, exactly like those which Mr. Armstrong chose to cover in the broadcasts and in *The Plain Truth* magazine. They are the first ones that need to be learned as an introduction to this way of life. It involves a lot of "deprogramming" from the blatant errors which are taught in this world's churches. But once those who are called have cast off those false concepts and embraced fundamental truth—have become capable of discerning both good and evil according to God's law—there is then a whole separate category of doctrines called "strong meat." These are like the advanced level classes, requiring the mastery of prerequisite, introductory courses before these higher concepts can be absorbed.

Do "strong meat" doctrines contradict "milk" doctrines in any way? Of course not! We are talking about the perfect body of God's Truth, defined by the commandments, statutes, and judgments. Both the simple—fundamental—teachings, as well as the deeper aspects of God's truths are part of one cohesive body of law. There is no contradiction. But then, what makes one teaching fundamental vs. advanced—milk vs. strong meat? Following is an example.

Sabbath Keeping and the Calendar

One of the most fundamental doctrines taught to new converts is the need to keep the weekly Sabbath. One of the cornerstones of Mr. Armstrong's radio broadcasts was defense of the weekly Sabbath and debunking the legitimacy of Sunday observance. This is a "milk" doctrine, because even a casual reading of the Bible shows no evidence that the Sabbath was ever done away, and absolutely no evidence that God ever approved a change to Sunday. That is why he would throw down the gauntlet and challenge listeners not to believe him, but to blow the dust off their Bibles and prove it for themselves. Also considered a milk doctrine is the need to keep the annual Sabbaths, those Holy Days commanded in Leviticus 23 to be kept along with the weekly Sabbath. The New Testament contains numerous examples of Holy Day references among the Gentile converts—not just the Jewish Christians—including Paul's admonishment for the Corinthian church to keep the Feast of Unleavened Bread (1 Corinthians 5:8). Because there is clear Bible proof of this, it is likewise a "milk" doctrine, even though we are not aware that Mr. Armstrong ever preached about the Holy Days on *The World Tomorrow* broadcast. Interestingly enough, there are some church members who came into the body back in the 1950s who were even baptized without yet knowing about the annual Holy Days. Their early learning came only from those radio broadcasts and through booklets ordered from that program, so they did not then know about the Holy Days. Even so, it was never long before a new contact would be told about the Holy Days. It was a fundamental teaching.

But consider this: It is easy to apply the "Berean test" to the Holy Days, since like the weekly Sabbath, there is no Biblical proof they were ever done away by God. Furthermore, Zechariah 14:16 shows that the Feast of Tabernacles will be kept by the entire world when Christ returns, so it makes no sense that those days have been set aside today. This is good old "Berean test" logic. But once you accept the simple truth that Holy Days must be kept, how then will you go about actually doing it?

Well, to begin with, you must know when those days fall during the year. As much as the weekly Sabbath is the seventh day of the week and no other, the annual Holy Days fall on precise days during the year, and no others. When do they fall? Guesses will not do. According to our modern day Bereans, we should be able to go directly to the Bible and find God's instructions on when to keep these Holy Days. So then, let us examine that proof! Oh yes, each Holy Day is clearly stated to fall on a particular day of a particular month (or in the case of Pentecost, a specific formula is given for counting from a particular benchmark). The Bible tells us that Passover is the fourteenth day of the first month (Leviticus 23:5). Great! Now all we need to know is when that first month begins each year, and then it is easy to apply these instructions. So where does God record in the Bible the formula for determining "New Year's Day" each year?

Uh-oh. Now we have a problem. The nearest thing we have to go on is that God told Moses and Aaron while they were still in Egypt, "This month shall be unto you the beginning of months: it shall be the first month of the year to you" (Exodus 12:2). Fine, but when did that first month *actually begin*, in a context which we can utilize *today* to prove it? We know the Bible says all months begin with new moons, but *which* new moon each spring marks "New Year's Day"? Is it the first new moon after the vernal equinox (the beginning of spring)? Or perhaps it's the new moon *nearest* the vernal equinox, either before or after? Or maybe it is whichever new moon falls in the right time frame to assure the current year's barley crop is sufficiently matured by Passover. All of these are good guesses. But the point is, *guesses are all that they are!* Every one of these are *assumptions* made by those seeking to fill in the gaps left by the absence of direct Biblical instruction.

The truth is, God did not choose to record in the Bible the formula for determining "New Year's Day" in His sacred calendar, no matter what anyone claims. It is simply not there. Not a single one of these many theories will pass the Berean test. And if you cannot definitively pinpoint "New Year's Day", you cannot determine anything else in that calendar either. The first day of the first month in a calendar is *the cornerstone* upon which the entire calendar is generated. If you make a mistake in assigning which new moon is the *first* new moon of the year, all your conclusions in assigning Holy Days will likewise be wrong.

Did God Forget to Tell Us?

"Now wait just a minute," you might say. Did God overlook the need to record the calendar formula in the Bible? After all, it must be there someplace, right? Otherwise, how are we to keep the Holy Days properly? We have already proved that they have not been done away and must be kept. And God states that His Sabbaths (plural, meaning both the weekly and annual Sabbaths) are *a sign* between Him and His people (Exodus 31:13; Ezekiel 20:12, 20). Anyone who refuses to keep them is not under that sign. Likewise, anyone who keeps them on the wrong days is cut off from God.

Some today claim it does not really matter if you get the dates for the Holy Days wrong, as long as you do your best to keep them. Tell that to the rebellious Israelites under Jeroboam who accepted his corrupted Feast of Tabernacles one month later than the real one, and ultimately went into captivity because of that false spirit (1 Kings 12:22–23). Tell that to the disciples who received the Holy Spirit for the first time on Pentecost after Christ's resurrection, and would have missed that great miracle had they been in the wrong place at the wrong time (Acts 2:1–4). Somehow most former members of the church are not so nonchalant when it comes to the weekly Sabbath. Very few of them will tell you it does not matter whether we know if the seventh day is really on Saturday or some other day, as long as we pick one and do our best to keep it. No, most are adamant we must know the correct

day of the Sabbath. So why would God's *annual* Sabbaths have any less importance? They do not.

So again, if these annual Sabbaths are part of the sign between God and His people—and we are obligated to be in legitimately appointed places to convoke before Him when He appears in our midst—how can we fulfill this command if we do not have confirmation of His sacred calendar? Did God put us all in a catch-22? Did He record in the Bible the need for Holy Day observance, but then make it impossible to be sure how to do it correctly? Not at all! God absolutely provided a confirmation to the Church of the correct calendar so that none of His faithful children need ever fear observing the wrong days. But He did not do so in a way that will fulfill the test of our modern-day Bereans.

How Do We Know Which Calendar?

It was Herbert Armstrong who really brought focus in this age to God's Holy Days. The Jews certainly keep them in a manner, but primarily as memorials of historical events. There were certainly a few others before Mr. Armstrong who advocated that Christians should keep them, but without any insight into why, or what they represented in God's master plan. Only Mr. Armstrong gave us strong Biblical evidence that they should be kept, and why. And this man through whom we learned that Truth also told us how to be sure we were keeping the correct days. What was his instruction?

He taught that God made the Jews responsible for delivering to the Church in these last days the uncorrupted Holy Scriptures, as well as the authorized sacred calendar. In spite of the Jews' proclivity to corrupt everything they touched, we were told that God sustained a miracle to force them to bring down through all generations the unadulterated Scriptures so we could be sure to have the true Word of God in our Bibles, and that likewise, they were required to keep the correct calendar so the Church would be sure to know when the first month of the new year began each year. We were taught not to trust the Jews in how they *used* that calendar to assign their own days of observance, but that the calendar itself was absolutely kept by the authority of God.

Great! Now all we need is to see where in the Bible Mr. Armstrong got that explanation. His only passage to support it was Paul's statement to the Romans:

What advantage then hath the Jew? or what profit is there of circumcision? Much every way: chiefly, because that unto them were committed the oracles of God (Romans 3:1–2).

Mr. Armstrong asserted that the "oracles of God" included both the Holy Scripture *and the sacred calendar*. But where is the Berean proof? There is none! Yet the very man who is responsible for you and me knowing about and valuing the Holy Days confirmed this doctrine with authority!

Did he then say, "Don't believe me, believe your Bibles!"? Of course not, because there was no such "proof." Yet he was keeping and proclaiming the Holy Days in this manner from the 1930s and teaching the church to do the same, all during the same time he was telling radio audiences to check up and not to take his word for anything.

How Does It All Make Sense?

Knowledge of the need to keep God's Holy Days is a "milk" doctrine. But knowledge of *how to do it properly*, when God did not give the specific details in the Bible, is "strong meat." So are we saying that we have to believe "a man" and trust with blind faith? No, what we are saying is that in the process of conversion, we are all required to do exactly what Jesus Christ commanded.

It is Jesus Christ who confirmed He had come as an ambassador of His Father, and that even He—being the literal Son of God—did not bring His own message, but only what He was told to deliver:

Jesus answered them, and said, My doctrine is not mine, but his that sent me. If any man will do his will, he shall know of the doctrine, whether it be of God, or whether I speak of myself. He that speaketh of himself seeketh his own glory: but he that seeketh his glory that sent him, the same is true, and no unrighteousness is in him (John 7:16–18).

So Christ first asserted that He was a legitimate messenger from God, and that He was bringing only what God told Him to deliver. Later in John's account, Christ said this:

He that loveth me not keepeth not my sayings: and the word which ye hear is not mine, but the Father's which sent me (John 14:24).

He asserted again that the doctrines He taught were from God, and rejecting them would not just be rejecting Jesus—the human messenger—but rejecting God Himself. He went even further and declared that He would be appointing other men to act as His ambassadors—apostles—to teach Truth to the Church, and they would carry that same authority of Christ and His Father:

Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that receiveth whomsoever I send receiveth me; and he that receiveth me receiveth him that sent me (John 13:20).

He that heareth you heareth me; and he that despiseth you despiseth me; and he that despiseth me despiseth him that sent me (Luke 10:16).

This proves very plainly that the called were required to come to identify *and then accept* teachings from whoever would be those authorized messengers from Christ. He did not advocate allowance for the called to remain unsure, confused, and noncommittal. As He was performing His work—simultaneously being accused of being a false prophet—Christ basically drew a line in the sand and told the people to choose:

Either make the tree good, and his fruit good; or else make the tree corrupt, and his fruit corrupt: for the tree is known by his fruit (Matthew 12:33).

For a good tree bringeth not forth corrupt fruit; neither doth a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit (Luke 6:43).

Jesus was professing to be a "good tree"—a legitimate messenger from God—and requiring the people to decide one way or the other whether that was true. He told them:

Believest thou not that I am in the Father, and the Father in me? the words that I speak unto you I speak not of myself: but the Father that dwelleth in me, he doeth the works. Believe me that I am in the Father, and the Father in me: or else *believe me for the very works' sake* (John 14:10–11) [emphasis mine].

So those disciples had been shown enough "evidence" that justified Christ making them commit. Had they proven that He was the true Christ, or had they not? If He had provided enough evidence for them to prove He was legitimate, then they were thereafter required to *act on that foundation of proof* and become teachable. If He were a bonafide "good tree," then all fruit on that tree could be counted as being good. He was saying it's a false concept to believe that the "low hanging" fruit—that which is easily tested—is good, but then claim the fruit growing way up high out of reach might still be bad, if we cannot get our hands upon it to test it. If all the fruit you *can* reach and test is good, He was saying we must have confidence that the rest of the fruit from that same source is likewise trustworthy.

But such a provision absolutely knocks in the head this Berean test doctrine espoused by independent-minded church members today who do not intend to take anything on faith. Yet is that not precisely what the Bereans did?

What Did the Bereans Actually Do?

Where is the proof that those faithful Bereans refused to be teachable by the Apostle Paul concerning "strong meat" doctrines? Where is there evidence that the Bereans ever refused to accept any teaching on faith that they could not absolutely prove by their own reading of the Holy Scripture? A further examination of the account in the Book of Acts will make it very clear there is no such evidence. Again, what actually happened?

And the brethren immediately sent away Paul and Silas by night unto Berea: who coming thither went into the synagogue of the Jews. These were more noble than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the scriptures daily, whether those things were so (Acts 17:10–11).

What this tells us is that Paul entered a synagogue of the Jews in Berea, and being a total stranger to them, began to show them proof of "the word." But what word—or specific doctrine—was he preaching to them? It was the same message that got him in trouble and kicked out of Thessalonica, because the Bereans are compared directly to the Thessalonians in their reaction to that same message (verse 11). And what was that message?

And Paul, as his manner was, went in unto them, and three sabbath days reasoned with them out of the scriptures, Opening and *alleging, that Christ must needs have suffered, and risen again from the dead; and that this Jesus, whom I preach unto you, is Christ* (Acts 17:2–3) [emphasis mine].

So the doctrine Paul was preaching was Christ being the fulfillment of the prophecy of a sacrificial Lamb required for the sins of the world. It is one of those "milk" doctrines, because it is easily proven in what we call the Old Testament—the only Bible they had at the time. Even though those written prophecies had been there for centuries, God never allowed the Israelites to understand them in advance. Only after Christ came did He begin to reveal the fact that the Messiah would not just arrive as a conquering King, but must first come as a sacrificial Lamb. Notice what happened during His ministry when He spoke of it, and how the people were absolutely repulsed by the idea that the true Christ must die:

And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto me. This he said, signifying what death he should die. The people answered him, We have heard out of the law that Christ abideth for ever: and how sayest thou, The Son of man must be lifted up? who is this Son of man? (John 12:32–34).

It was a totally foreign concept to them that the Messiah must first die before returning in glory at a *Second Coming*. The Jewish leaders had always told the people that the Messiah

would come soon and usher in the time of great peace and prosperity. Their minds were blinded to this simple truth (as we consider it today), because it was not God's will for anyone to see it until it actually came to pass. Once that prophecy *did* come to pass, then the apostles were sent out to proclaim its fulfillment and to debunk the false notion that there was only one arrival of the Messiah.

Paul was facing the same kind of environment as did Herbert Armstrong centuries later. The religious leaders of the day who knew and used the Holy Scripture were misleading the people by ignoring clear Bible passages that told the real truth. Paul took advantage of this by showing them the clear evidence of the need for the Messiah to die. It was a thunderbolt! There it was in the Bible the whole time, but no one ever saw it. And here was this stranger who came along and showed them this jewel of a doctrine that they could absolutely prove from their own Bibles. How amazing! It is exactly what this same God did through Herbert Armstrong, as this particular man expounded things that had always been right there in the Bible, but no one else in this age had ever put together.

These Bereans—whom God was calling—did not respond to this stranger named Paul because he was tall and dashing, or because he had an attractive orator's persona that wowed them. No, they were not ones to respond to any outward appearance of a man, and they wanted proof that he was truly a legitimate messenger from God. How did they prove it? By seeing for themselves the simple truth of what Paul—and no one else before—had been able to teach them out of the Holy Scripture. There it was right before them! What a miracle.

So now the Bereans had put Paul to the test. They verified he was not just some self-appointed religious kook trying to start his own church. He had real substance which could not be denied. This could only be true because He was a legitimate messenger from God.

So now what? How does God record what the Bereans did after that initial meeting, and how they responded to the "strong meat" doctrines which would certainly be taught later? Oh, there is no further record. So we cannot verify what they did after that one way or the other. If there is no direct proof in writing, how can anyone claim the Bereans are an example of a church who never ever accepted any doctrinal teachings on faith, even after having proved that Paul was a "good tree"? Ironically, there is no "Berean proof" of their own contention. It is all speculation, inferred to substantiate an independent orientation within the church, justifying the rejection of any authorized ministry.

But having already proven that God classified His Truth as including both milk and strong meat doctrines—and that same body of Truth must have been taught to the Bereans as members of the New Testament Church—how would they have responded to necessary teachings that were not documented in the Old Testament—their only Bible of the day?

Could the Bereans Really Prove All Things?

What about when Paul told them that the keeping of the Passover was not now done with lamb meat and bitter herbs, but with a new ordinance of unleavened bread, wine, and foot washing? How were they going to prove that from the Scriptures? It was not there! That was merely testimony Paul had learned from God in the Arabian desert, and which had been witnessed by the original Twelve, who were present at that final Passover service. Paul was not even a witness himself. Yet the Bereans were required to accept on faith that he was telling them the truth.

Paul also would have told them that they needed to go through a new ordinance called baptism—likewise not documented in their Bibles. What about the teaching that the sick should be anointed with oil by the ministry to receive healing? Where was *that* found in their Bibles? Paul even went so far as to say it was OK to send anointed cloths through the mail to accomplish this command (Acts 19:11–12). Where was that procedure "proven" in the Scriptures?

You see, brethren, we all take much for granted, given that our Bibles include both the Old Testament *and* the books written by these new apostles, whom we accept as having been legitimate. So we actually have *much less* to take on faith than did the first century Church of God, including the Bereans.

Is There Anything at All You Will Accept on Faith?

What should be absolutely clear now is that the Bereans—if they remained responsive and teachable as members of the New Testament Church—accepted *much* on faith that they could not "put to the test." They were required to do what Jesus Christ said, and either make the tree good—considering all doctrine which came from that source as good, even when it was not directly provable—or else make the tree evil—proving that he was a false prophet at the outset and thereby having confidence to reject *all* of the fruit.

Much as we understand and sympathize with so many former members of God's church in this age who have become bitter and suspicious, it still does not negate any of the spiritual commands incumbent upon the true Church of God. God said, "For therein is the righteousness of God revealed from faith to faith: as it is written, The just shall live by faith" (Romans 1:17). If you can put every single minuscule element to a physical proof, faith is absolutely negated!

Again, are we then advocating that God's people simply accept everything we say—with or without proof—like dumb, gullible sheep? Absolutely not! Every one of you

has the means to confirm where those "good trees" are today. You know who it was who taught the Truth in this age that no one else understood or proclaimed. And if that was the work of God—not the work of a man—then what that man taught was not his own message, but only that which he was given by divine inspiration, just like Christ Himself brought. And when you prove that you have found God's work, then it will reflect the very character of God, meaning those doctrines initially taught will never change. Then, all you have to do is find the location of servants today who are proclaiming that very same message. If they are confirming the very same truth which God has revealed throughout the ages, then you will know that must be the Holy Spirit at work. God will not let any imposter bear truly "good fruit" to deceive His children.

The Apostle Paul—whom the Bereans accepted—made bold assertions about his authority, and commanded the people to accept it.

Brethren, be followers together of me, and mark them which walk so as ye have us for an ensample (Philippians 3:17).

Paul was saying he had already proved to them he was a "good tree," and now he was commanding them to act upon that proof and become teachable. He likewise reminded them that not one of them had ever come to a knowledge of the Truth by their own efforts, and so they should lay down that self-righteous smugness which began to permeate the later church:

For who maketh thee to differ from another? and what hast thou that thou didst not receive? now if thou didst receive it, why dost thou glory, as if thou hadst not received it? (1 Corinthians 4:7).

The only way they ever understood God's truth to begin with was because a chosen servant of God was sent to preach it to them. Yet how many today have decided that they did not really need Herbert Armstrong. They now believe it was only a matter of time before they would have discovered that same truth through another source, especially their own Bible study. How deceived, and how vain.

How then shall they call on him in whom they have not believed? and how shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard? and how shall they hear without a preacher? And how shall they preach, except they be sent? as it is written, How beautiful are the feet of them that preach the gospel of peace, and bring glad tidings of good things! (Romans 10:14–15).

The Apostle John likewise laid down the gauntlet and demanded the people choose whether he was true or not:

We are of God: he that knoweth God heareth us; he that is not of God heareth not us. Hereby know we the spirit of truth, and the spirit of error (1 John 4:6).

He was really claiming to be a good tree, and was telling the people to get off the fence and either accept that assertion and become teachable, or else reject his claim and conclude he was an evil tree. It is one or the other.

Are We Advocating Blind Faith?

Are you required to accept anything and everything that a servant says, no matter what? Of course not. Paul also defined the limit of the authority of any chosen servant:

But though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed. As we said before, so say I now again, If any man preach any other gospel unto you than that ye have received, let him be accursed. For do I now persuade men, or God? or do I seek to please men? for if I yet pleased men, I should not be the servant of Christ. But I certify you, brethren, that the gospel which was preached of me is not after man. For I neither received it of man, neither was I taught it, but by the revelation of Jesus Christ (Galatians 1:8–12).

No man—not even an apostle—has the authority to change what God has already revealed and taught to the Church by divine revelation. God does not lie. If He is the One who inspired the message, even though communicated through the voice of a fallible human messenger, the message is as reliable as the One who sent it. And if God is the Sender, that doctrine is true and will never change.

So the test is actually rather easy. Identify first where that "good tree" was manifested originally. Verify then what was the message brought by that messenger, including both the milk and the strong meat doctrines which were the foundation of that Work. Then hold onto those original teachings and do not let anyone—including the originally inspired servant—tell you it was a mistake. If a good tree ultimately becomes poisoned and turns to false doctrine, that will be verifiable by the whole church through the repudiation of the original teachings.

Are We Just Following a Man?

Periodically someone accuses this remnant body of just following a man because we often quote from the written works of Herbert Armstrong. They say, "We are not interested in what any man taught. We want to be taught out of the Bible. Prove to me that what you

say is true by the Bible, not by quoting Herbert Armstrong." Well, when it comes to the many "milk" doctrines, that is easily done. We send out articles of our own which document the Biblical evidence of those fundamental truths, and expound those Bible truths in sermons.

But what about when the doctrine in question is one without such easy Biblical evidence, like the sacred calendar? That is when we assert the truth on that point by verifying what God's chosen servant of these last days taught on it, as part of the faith once delivered. Again, if Mr. Armstrong was indeed a "good tree," then the whole body of doctrine he espoused in those early years must have come from the same source. Otherwise, we accuse God of sending clean water and polluted water through the same pipe at the same time. How absurd.

So what if you do not want to accept what Herbert Armstrong taught about the validity of the Hebrew calendar? Then what will you do? As already proven, God did not choose to record the formula for that calendar in the Bible. Yet confirming that calendar is absolutely essential in order to keep the Holy Days, which is the sign between God and His people. How are you going to do it? You can do what many are doing today, making up their own rules, but God already warned His people against doing that:

Ye shall not do after all the things that we do here this day, every man whatsoever is right in his own eyes (Deuteronomy 12:8).

Yet this is exactly what was prophesied to happen in the last-day church:

Knowing this first, that no prophecy of the scripture is of any private interpretation. For the prophecy came not in old time by the will of man: but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy [Spirit]. But there were false prophets also among the people, even as there shall be false teachers among you, who privily shall bring in damnable heresies, even denying the Lord that bought them, and bring upon themselves swift destruction. And many shall follow their pernicious ways; by reason of whom the way of truth shall be evil spoken of (2 Peter 1:20–21; 2:1–2).

So just as God said would happen, many are out there today contradicting the original teachings the church used to keep together in harmony, claiming that Herbert Armstrong had "no proof" for much of it. Well frankly, neither do these men have any better proof for what they are professing. None of their assertions will stand up to the "Berean test" either.

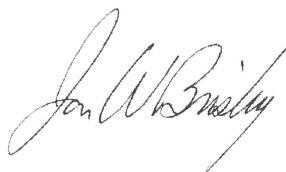
So what will *you* do? You can either wander around in a maze of confusion, running to one or another of the latest fads being promoted to debunk the teachings of Herbert

Armstrong, or else you can look at the fruits of that early Work and conclude that it must have been the Work of God, not the work of a man.

Church of God, The Eternal has proven that we are not a personality cult. Unlike most other groups, we became a remnant body while Mr. Armstrong was still alive and leading our parent organization. That is proof enough we are not willing to follow a man no matter what he does. We are willing to follow as long as the original revealed doctrines of God are defended. Faithful ministers holding fast to the faith deserve that respect. But if those servants turn and begin to deny the revelation they once preached to us, we choose to honor God over man, and will hold firm to the teachings Jesus Christ delivered.

Be very careful, brethren. Showing blind allegiance to any man—in spite of what he teaches—is a recipe for failure. But likewise, calling all trees "evil" just because we have become discouraged at the failures of men is a dangerous choice. Christ promised He would be with His Church—even a small remnant—until the very end. Where are those good trees today? The Bereans knew what to look for, and when they found it, they became subject to that benevolent authority to confirm the Word of God in their lives. If we each do the same thing, we can be certain to pass every test which will confront us before the return of Jesus Christ.

Your devoted and determined servant in Christ,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Jon W. Brisby". The signature is fluid and stylized, with the first and last names being more prominent than the middle initial.

Jon W. Brisby