

December 2009

Dear Brethren:

Most of those who spend time dissecting the history of the Worldwide Church of God focus almost exclusively upon Mr. Armstrong himself, or upon other influential leaders within that organization. But what about the members who made up that expansive body we believe constituted God's church in this age? From the earliest years, did the laity itself have attributes which influenced some of the critical outcomes manifested much later? When we analyze the history of *the membership* in God's church during the twentieth century, we identify additional pieces to the puzzle which help augment our understanding of the multidimensional forces coalescing to produce the final outcomes we witnessed in that organization.

Who were these people who responded to that original work, and what were their motivations for joining such an unusual and nonconformist religious movement? Although many interesting characteristics could be highlighted, let us focus upon five major categories which seem to encompass the majority of members by attribute. Many of these could apply to other churches as well, but they certainly apply to that particular body we are analyzing.

The Fearful

A major aspect of Mr. Armstrong's *World Tomorrow* radio broadcasts and articles in *The Plain Truth* magazine from the beginning focused upon Biblical prophecies highlighting terrifying events to occur on this earth before the return of Jesus Christ to usher in His Millennial reign of peace. Here is just one example, an excerpt from the 1956 edition of his book entitled, *1975 In Prophecy*:

Yes, WAKE UP! America and Britain! You have grown calloused and indifferent to world revolution, world wars and cold wars and the threat of hydrogen-bomb war. You Americans and British! You smug, proud, stiff-necked complacent people! You enjoy a prosperity God never lavished on any other people -- you heedlessly permit yourselves to become [sic] soft and decadent, setting your foolish hearts on a lush, push-button, prosperity of leisure. You ignore that entire prophetic THIRD of GOD'S WORD, warning you of impending disaster and offering you divine protection from it! Will any one of you who now read this warning awaken to the stern reality? GOD ALMIGHTY now reveals, in time to prevent it, that one third of all our people

will soon die of starvation and disease -- that our day of reckoning is upon us! -- that we are to be stripped of our wealth and prosperity on which we set our hearts -- that a second third of our people -- of your personal friends, relatives, acquaintances -- will be killed by the awesome hydrogen-bomb invasion -- that our proud United States and British Commonwealth are now destined to be suddenly crushed in defeat! -- that the remaining third left alive are to be carried as captives, scattered over the land of our enemies and their allies AS ABJECT SLAVES! -- and that even millions of them shall then be tortured inhumanly in organized religious persecution, until their breath expires in martyrdom! Jesus Christ said, "Ye shall be HATED of ALL NATIONS ... Then shall they deliver you up to be afflicted, and shall KILL YOU." Do you foolishly and carelessly assume He meant somebody else? Our booklet "U.S. and Britain in PROPHECY" proves He meant US. We are the nations that are HATED by all other nations today -- or hadn't you realized that alarming fact? Jesus Christ meant US -- and His words are as certain and sure as the rising and setting of the sun! Luke's inspired account of Jesus' words makes it even more specific: "For these be the days of vengeance, that all things which are written may be fulfilled" -- that is, when the prophetic things of your Bible come to their CLIMAX, and all prophecies are suddenly and rapidly fulfilled at this END-TIME! "And they" -- speaking of our nations, "shall fall by the edge of the sword, and shall be led away captive into all nations." (Luke 21:22, 24). This prophecy refers only typically to the Jewish captivity of 70 A.D. It refers primarily to OUR future. Jeremiah was inspired by the Almighty to picture this invasion, defeat and captivity and to explain WHY it's coming!

The anticipated timing of these prophetic fulfillments was not realized, but the Bible is nonetheless specific that such cataclysmic events will indeed occur on this earth before Christ's return. Mr. Armstrong's focus upon these facts from a Biblical perspective certainly got the attention of many of his listeners. And many of the people who responded and later became members of the Radio Church of God were ones who took these warnings very seriously.

When God saved Paul and Silas miraculously from incarceration in Thyatira by loosening their shackles and opening the doors of the prison (Acts 16:25-27), the Roman jailor would have killed himself at that moment had Paul not restrained him. The man was terrified by the experience.

Then he called for a light, and sprang in, and came trembling, and fell down before Paul and Silas, And brought them out, and said, Sirs, what must I do to be saved? And they said, Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved, and thy house (Acts 16:29-31).

In a similar way, many whom God called in our time were shaken by world events and for fear of what the future would hold for them. They, too, responded by imploring, "What must we do to be saved?" Mr. Armstrong confirmed what was required to become pleasing to God and to receive His favor, including protection from those terrifying events to come. The answer was to begin keeping God's commandments!

If ye love me, keep my commandments. And I will pray the Father, and he shall give you another Comforter, that he may abide with you for ever; Even the Spirit of truth; whom the world cannot receive, because it seeth him not, neither knoweth him: but ye know him; for he dwelleth with you, and shall be in you (John 14:15–17).

Because thou hast kept the word of my patience, I also will keep thee from the hour of temptation, which shall come upon all the world, to try them that dwell upon the earth (Revelation 3:10).

So, many began to keep the weekly Sabbath day, the annual Holy Days, and all of the other commandments which were demonstrated to be part of the spiritual law of God. They may never have really come *to appreciate* those laws, but they became willing to embrace them if that is what it took to secure their place under God's protective wing (Deuteronomy 32:10–12). This is the first major category of members who responded to the Radio Church of God.

The Followers

The famous French novelist and playwright, Alexandre Dumas, gave us this axiom: "Nothing succeeds like success." Many successful enterprises seem to generate special—*invisible*—momentum over time by attracting followers from the sidelines who become swept up in the movement. Everyone loves a winner and to be associated with the excitement of a curious new enterprise. As unorthodox as the work of Herbert Armstrong was within the religious world, once enough pioneer members had responded to provide a viable base, and once that organization had grown sufficiently through the 1950s, the Radio Church of God began to achieve more of an "acceptance" thereafter, even for no other reason than it was undeniably successful and growing with huge momentum. The average annual growth in membership continued at the absurd rate of *thirty percent per year* all the way until 1968. Amazing!

During the 1960s and beyond, the constituency of "average" new members changed. No longer did one have to be willing to become a complete and total laughing stock in the world, as did many of those earlier responders who joined in the 1930s or 40s. By the 1960s, the media exposure from radio and magazine distribution—not to mention those

huge conventions (Feast of Tabernacles) each fall all over North America, with thousands of members descending upon those communities and spending so much money—lent a more respectable (and accepted) image for the church. The positive reputation of Ambassador College did as well. After all, they thought, even though they hold weird beliefs, if they are that big and still growing—and with that much money—they must have something going for them. New members were now able to join without nearly the degree of stigma which had been associated with membership in earlier decades.

As well, there are always those who naturally seem to gravitate to "new" religious movements, and now there was another new option to consider among the other major denominations.

God's church has always existed in a mixed multitude. When Israel received miraculous favor from God, who gave them freedom from Egyptian slavery and made of them a new nation, more than just the true descendants of Abraham formed the huge army of the Exodus. "And a mixed multitude went up also with them; and flocks, and herds, even very much cattle" (Exodus 12:38). Yes, Israel attracted attention from many others who recognized their success and their undeniable momentum, and so sought to share in the blessings. If all had continued to go well for them, and if that initial momentum had been sustained without challenge or interruption, it is possible that these "fair-weather followers" might have continued happily and productively within the congregation. But since that was not God's will to allow, it was only a matter of time before many who had ridden the early waves of success would become disenchanted when Israel fell on hard times. "And the mixed multitude that was among them fell a lusting; and the children of Israel also wept again, and said, Who shall give us flesh to eat?" (Numbers 11:4).

These fair-weather *followers* constituted a second and growing category of church member during the history of the Radio Church of God.

The Influenced

Another major category of member, which became more significant in later years, included those who grew up as children within the church, or else those who joined primarily because someone they loved was a devoted member.

The more time that passed from the beginning of Mr. Armstrong's work, the more children there were who were raised to maturity being taught those doctrines of the church. While the earliest decades were dominated by members who had chosen that way of life for themselves as adults, the demographics changed over time as more and more attendees included second and third generation participants. Many of those children did not choose to continue in their "parent's religion" once they matured, but then again, many others *did*

choose to stay with the church to some degree or another. Yet, among those who stayed for a time, how many of them were truly convicted in that way of life vs. just continuing what was familiar to them from their childhood? This category of member included those who did not necessarily make *major* changes in their lives to begin keeping God's commandments. They just kept doing what they had been taught to do by someone else.

Additionally, it would be nice to think that in every case where a husband and wife (for example) both became baptized members, that each of them was truly acting according to very strong personal faith before God. But that is often not the case. It has nothing to do with a lack of honesty, necessarily. A husband may truly believe at the time that he is responding according to his own personal convictions. But even though he may not recognize it in himself, he may actually be responding more so to create peace in his home and to please his wife who becomes a devoted member. If one does not already have strong religious convictions of his own, why not adopt those that will make his family life more harmonious? Has this really been an historic factor in choice of church membership? Of course it has! Even if it is not evident at a given moment, many have looked back later and admitted that they were not really convicted personally in the doctrines of the church as much as they were trying to accommodate a converted loved one.

Whether it involves husbands and wives, children, siblings, or even close friends, this collective category became another significant demographic of membership within the church begun under Mr. Herbert Armstrong.

The Opportunists

Akin to *the followers* in some ways, there are others who may join a church for even *different* reasons. Unlike *the followers*, who may just get caught up in an emotional response and become swept along by the swift-moving current of a popular movement, *the opportunist* calculates his membership as a choice for very definite reasons. This is the individual who sees a particular advantage in being a member which has nothing to do with agreement with the group's doctrine, and in essence feigns belief to gain acceptance. This does not mean the opportunist necessarily has any evil intents. It simply means his fellowship with the group really is not rooted in a true concern for what that group stands for doctrinally.

The motives for such affiliation can be as diverse as there are human minds to dream them. An individual may simply seek inclusion in a social network which church membership provides, regardless of which group it is or what it teaches. If he likes the people and builds some strong friendships, that may be enough to make him want to stay. Or, he may crave something else that a church assembly provides, like an audience for the display of his personal talents, like singing or playing an instrument, group activity

organization, sports participation, cooking, charity outreach, etc. Perhaps church affiliation is the best opportunity he has to develop and to exercise those kinds of interests. In each of these examples, we are not talking about any insidious agenda to undermine or to harm the church in any way. It simply addresses the reality that some people join and remain in a church fellowship for reasons that have nothing to do with strong agreement with doctrine. And the larger and more prominent a particular church becomes over time, the more attractive it will likewise become to many who may have these kinds of *innocent*, howbeit, *ulterior* motives.

The opportunist can also include those who have quite nefarious intentions which are detrimental to the body. This no doubt affects all secular groups and churches of this world to some extent as well, but it is especially a consideration for the true Church of God, wherever that Body may exist. Why? Wherever that Church resides, it is always the primary target of Satan the Devil (Luke 22:31; 1 Peter 5:8). There is no group he desires to destroy more than the one which Christ has built, and so the probability of having some of these negative influences is always greater than it would be in the world.

Another parable put he forth unto them, saying, The kingdom of heaven is likened unto a man which sowed good seed in his field: But while men slept, his enemy came and sowed tares among the wheat, and went his way. . . . The field is the world; the good seed are the children of the kingdom; but the tares are the children of the wicked one; The enemy that sowed them is the devil (Matthew 13:24–25, 38–39).

Were there individuals from all four of these categories—the *fearful*, the *followers*, those *influenced by others*, and the *opportunists*—who attached themselves to the Radio Church of God over those years in which it grew so phenomenally? Yes indeed.

The True Believers

The fifth and *most significant* category of member in that church included those who came to value the actual doctrines of the Radio Church of God and who counted them as a gift from God rather than as a burdensome obligation. It does not mean that they may not have come in originally for a different reason. They initially may have been among the fearful, the followers, the influenced, or even the opportunists. But the difference is, over time—as they learned more of God's truth and began to practice it in their lives—they became compelled by the legitimacy of those principles and *proved* the intrinsic value of those doctrines to themselves by living them. This is exactly what Christ admonishes His called children to do. "Prove [by real application] all things; hold fast that which is good" (1 Thessalonians 5:21). Once you have proven *through exercise* that a commanded principle actually leads to blessings rather than cursings—meaning you confirm that it "is

good"—who can later convince you it is not so? What is proven is proven. How did such a transition to real belief come for many?

There were many aspects of church doctrine which Mr. Armstrong never chose to emphasize on *The World Tomorrow* radio program in the early years. An example of that is the annual Holy Days. He most definitely put a spotlight upon the seventh day Sabbath, but he never really taught about the *annual* Sabbaths on the air (the same is true in his autobiography). That was one part of the doctrine which new contacts would learn after they requested more information from the church. The radio broadcast messages focused upon more basic topics which would really get people's attention and draw them to the program—Sunday vs. the Sabbath, Christmas as pagan, the resurrection not on Sunday, man not an immortal soul, man not promised heaven, the Ten Commandments not done away, the modern descendants of Israel, prophecy of last-day tribulation, etc. What then does this imply?

Regardless of which issue may have initially attracted a listener to Mr. Armstrong's message, if he continued to pursue the deeper layers of that way of life, he eventually faced the requirement of significant changes which were never anticipated at the outset. Example (true story):

A man hears Herbert Armstrong on the radio for the first time in 1958. The program that day is confirming the identity of modern Israel, which this man already happens to understand. The man is attracted because this preacher acknowledges a truth which other preachers will not, which seems to give Mr. Armstrong some unique credibility. So he listens to more programs to see what else this unusual man might say. He hears Mr. Armstrong claim that Christmas is pagan, and then challenges his audience to prove it from the encyclopedia. The listener did not expect that. But guess what? He looks it up and discovers he was right! Christmas really was never Christian at all. That is something new to him. Then he learns there is no basis for worship on Sunday. What? Really? And because he was challenged by Mr. Armstrong to prove it for himself, he does so. He learns further that the true gospel of Jesus Christ is not a message *about* Christ, but *the very message* Christ Himself taught—the Good News of the coming Kingdom of God. One issue after another, this man becomes convicted of truths he did not know before but are very clear from the Bible, and this knowledge will now require major changes in his personal practices to begin to worship God correctly.

This man does not know about the Holy Days yet. In fact, even when two ministers come through his local area on a baptizing tour in late 1959 (there was no local minister or congregation in his area yet), they baptize him without requiring him to have that knowledge yet. He only finds out about the annual Holy Days a few weeks later from church letters. He thinks, what? Keep these other strange "Jewish" days? What have I gotten myself into? But he studies that too, and attends the Feast, and embraces those

doctrines as well. After all, it is all part of the "total package" which Mr. Armstrong has been preaching with such authority. So many of those doctrines are ones that *no other church* is teaching in that way, and yet they are *right there* in the Bible! It all fits together. Even if some teachings have less "black and white" support in Scripture by comparison to many others, they are still not contradictory at all, and in fact complement everything else which *can be proven* very easily.

Over the years, he gains a real respect for all of those teachings he once thought were so "strange" at first. He originally became introduced to them one at a time. There were many changes that had to take place in his thinking, but looking back, he can say that he really *proved* the value of those doctrines by actually *living them*, and seeing the bonafide blessing of God come as a result of that obedience.

... prove me now herewith, saith the LORD of hosts, if I will not open you the windows of heaven, and pour you out a blessing, that there shall not be room enough to receive it (Malachi 3:10).

This is only one among thousands of stories from those who became *true believers* at one time or another. Maybe the first thing which "hooked" one of these individuals was a fear about coming national tribulation. Maybe she already had a family member in the church which caused her to "give it a try" also. Maybe he was just curious about this new denomination which seemed unusual and exciting at the time. Maybe she saw an opportunity to help herself in some personal way by joining. Regardless of the initial motivation, those *who stayed* because they discovered there was *real substance* within the body of belief which Mr. Armstrong was preaching became *convicted in mind and heart*.

Regardless of whether they were each just brainwashed by a clever cult leader or not—that is not the point at hand. We are cataloging the different *major categories* of those individuals who became members of the Radio Church of God. The *true believers*—regardless of what path they each trod to arrive there—became the foundation of that peculiar but dynamically-growing religious movement.

So, interestingly, the fearful, the followers, the influenced, and even the opportunists, all had the chance to become *true believers*. But what about the ones who never did so?

The Unconvinced

What about the ones who joined for whatever reason, but who never really came to love the doctrine for its own sake—the ones who merely *tolerated* those teachings as a way of preserving their rights of membership in the physical organization?

What percentages of the entire membership ultimately divided between the *true believers* and *the unconvinced*? No one really knows for sure. And how did this *mixed multitude* behave once serious trials began to affect that church as a whole in later years? Most of what we know is derived by observing the personal choices members made when those difficulties emerged. Choices under pressure are always most telling.

What should be easily discerned by common sense is that any member of the Radio Church of God who did not really value *the doctrine* was primed to give it up if the circumstances became right. Those who were only "putting up with" those *hard and inconvenient* dos and don'ts were the first to celebrate when the ministry began to change them to be less restrictive.

Which say to the seers, See not; and to the prophets, Prophecy not unto us right things, speak unto us smooth things, prophesy deceits (Isaiah 30:10).

For of this sort are they which creep into houses, and lead captive silly women laden with sins, led away with divers lusts (2 Timothy 3:6).

This statement by Paul is not meant to be condescending to women, but addresses a natural vulnerability by an impressionable young woman who might be "led on" by a clever and persuasive young rake. She is vulnerable because she wants to be convinced it is OK to do what she wants to do anyway. When a persuasive suitor comes along, she becomes putty in his hands. This is the analogy God chose to use to describe the mental orientation of *many* of His called children—both male and female—who became seduced later on by ministers who told them what they wanted to hear. Because they had never become *truly convicted* that the laws of God were good and profitable for them, they were itching for an excuse to change them without feeling they were "disobeying."

The actions of the ministry—those leading that body—set into motion that prophesied departure from Truth. But such changes could never have been effected if a significant portion of the membership was not already primed and eager for "relief." We have dealt with God's condemnation of those corrupted shepherds in many other issues. There is no doubt He holds them accountable for the destruction and scattering of the flock.

Woe be unto the pastors that destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture! saith the LORD. Therefore thus saith the LORD God of Israel against the pastors that feed my people; Ye have scattered my flock, and driven them away, and have not visited them: behold, I will visit upon you the evil of your doings, saith the LORD (Jeremiah 23:1–2).

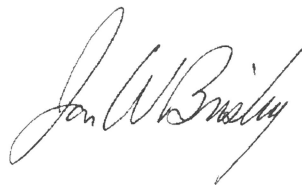
This, however, does not exonerate *the members* of that body from their own accountability before God.

If thou sayest, Behold, we knew it not; doth not he that pondereth the heart consider it? and he that keepeth thy soul, doth not he know it? and shall not he render to every man according to his works? (Proverbs 24:12).

The catalysts which ultimately produced major upheaval within the Worldwide Church of God included dynamics which derived from both minister and laymember alike. It was the culmination of significant attitudes within *both groups* which sparked the perfect storm of events which generated the results we have witnessed over the last forty years. There is no way to understand *the full story* of that church during the twentieth century unless the orientation of the laity is considered along with that of the ministry. The transitional make-up of that body and the reasons for member participation had everything to do with what happened in the end. Understanding these dynamics not only provides a context for the history of that beloved church, but is a means to analyze our own motives today.

Why did you originally choose to be part of that body? If you are a member, why are you still associated with it today? Have you found a way of life doctrinally which you are convinced is right and true? Have you come to love it so much that you would sacrifice everything else to preserve that truth in your life? If so, then you have the basis for continuity no matter what the future may yet hold for the people of God in these last days.

Yours with love in Christ Jesus,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Jon W. Brisby". The signature is fluid and elegant, with the first letters of each word being capitalized and prominent.

Jon W. Brisby