

March 2011

Dear Brethren:

In the February, October, and December 2010 issues of this *Letter*, we investigated the historical work of Mr. Herbert Armstrong, comparing his teachings with those Biblically defined attributes of the true Church of God. For those who may never have known (or do not remember) that history, it is beneficial to assess the enduring legacy of his most unusual work. In the final analysis, the just must live by faith, but how is someone brand new to those teachings expected truly to put those concepts *to the test*, to prove whether or not God was ever really involved in his ministry? The documented history of the Radio Church of God is quite fascinating, and there are plenty of facts available to allow anyone interested to weigh them on the scales of plausibility. Many past writers have provided "their take" on that history, interpreting the legacy of Herbert Armstrong according to their *personal views* about real Truth. The problem is, their scripts have left much of the most interesting *verifiable history* hidden in obscurity, likely because it did not fit their predefined conclusions. Our goal is to bring that *hidden history* to the fore, providing a broader and more complete picture of the complex events which coalesced within that unique religious movement. Was that grand work—later referred to as *Armstrongism* by his detractors—really of God, or was it merely the lucrative religious scheme of an opportunistic salesman?

Help From the Antagonists

Herbert Armstrong's detractors provide a wealth of information very helpful in testing the evidence. Among those who have concluded emphatically that he *was not* led or inspired by God with his controversial teachings, how do they prove it? If correct, one would think our very best source for proof would come from those particular leaders of the Worldwide Church of God who *became compelled* to lead their members in repudiation of most of Mr. Armstrong's teachings after his death. They claim to have done so *in conscience*, believing sincerely that Herbert Armstrong was wrong, and that is why they became willing to put the entire church through an excruciating transition to reject the foundation of his most beloved teachings. Yes, let us begin with their take on their own founder's legacy.

Recall that it was Joseph Tkach, Sr. who succeeded Mr. Armstrong as Pastor General after his death in early 1986, initiating the *transition*. When Mr. Tkach died in 1995, his son, Joseph, Jr., took up the reins and carried forward his father's grand vision. Joseph Tkach, Jr. wrote a detailed account about his own thinking during those tumultuous years in his 1997 book, *Transformed By Truth*. The subtitle of the book says it all: "*The Worldwide Church of God rejects the teachings of founder Herbert W. Armstrong and embraces historic Christianity*." What is his reason for concluding Mr. Armstrong's doctrines were not only empty, but dangerous? Upon what premise was this analysis based? You need to weigh it.

In chapter seven entitled, "What We Believed," Mr. Tkach begins a detailed survey of Mr. Armstrong's most prominent teachings. The first and most important point he makes is that Herbert Armstrong did not really originate any of his own teachings, but borrowed them all in one way or another from other religious teachers, especially Protestants!

Mr. Armstrong was nothing in his theological approach if not eclectic. He borrowed and adapted most of his "unique" teachings from others. Often when we try to tell some of our people that Mr. Armstrong borrowed much of his teaching from outside sources, we meet heavy resistance. So we sometimes respond with the following: "Allow us to lay out a challenge aimed at combating the idea that these doctrines were specially revealed to Herbert Armstrong. We want to show that they really did not pour directly from the Godhead into his mind. Here's our challenge: You know the distinctive teachings of Herbert Armstrong; now you name the teaching and we'll tell you where it came from. We'll show you what preceded Herbert Armstrong and demonstrate that the teaching was *not* specially revealed to him and it *wasn't* restored from the first century" (*Transformed By Truth*, p. 88).

Before addressing some of the specific examples of these "copied" doctrines, let us first examine the root of Mr. Tkach's thesis. It presumes that in order to justify rejecting the theology of mainstream Christianity (which Mr. Armstrong certainly did), any "true apostle" claiming divine inspiration from God, 1) must proclaim only concepts which are *totally original* and have *never been "discovered"* by any past religionist, and 2) must have received that inspiration by means of direct "speaking" from God, like Moses receiving the law by God's direct dictation to him upon Mt. Sinai. The inference is that if there were no "*Sinai dictation session*," and what was received was not *totally unheard of previously* by mankind, it could not have been attributed to any special work of God. There is also a third inference implied in the quote above: that Herbert Armstrong *believed* points one and two to be true and predicated his own legitimacy as an instrument of God upon their validity. But are those assertions accurate?

From Where Did His Understanding Derive?

Did Herbert Armstrong ever claim that God poured divine truth into his head in one or more secret, secluded meetings with Jesus Christ? Not that we can find. In fact, he seemed to have published many statements over the years describing openly the means by which he gained his understanding of God's Truth, and it was not through the equivalent of a *Sinai dictation*. There is no doubt, however, that he claimed to have been *uniquely and miraculously inspired* by God.

First, notice that he claimed *the work itself* was the purposeful endeavor of God, not man:

Yes, we CAN KNOW, if willing to know, whether we are right or wrong. It is not a matter of superior intellect, but of SUBMISSION TO GOD. But the conclusion of the whole question is this: I did not start this work of my own accord at all. It is the very last thing I would have wanted, in my days of carnality, to do. IT IS GOD'S DOING!

By circumstances, God forced me to submission. The living CHRIST so manipulated events and the force of circumstance that He literally PLUNGED me into His Work. It is not my work—it is THE VERY WORK OF GOD. And THIS can be easily proved, to those willing to know the TRUTH! (*The Plain Truth*, December 1963, "Personal from the Editor")

Notice next that he also claimed to have been called and commissioned *uniquely* as a representative of Jesus Christ to confirm God's Truth with authority:

It was in this UNIQUE manner that I was brought to discover THE MISSING DIMENSION IN EDUCATION—the truth as to WHY humanity was put on this earth—the true PURPOSE of human life—the CAUSE of all the world's unhappiness, unsolvable problems and evils—the difference between the TRUE VALUES and the false—THE WAY that can be the only CAUSE of PEACE between nations, groups and individuals—the only CAUSE of true success in life with happiness, peace, prosperity and abundance.

No, I know of no one else who was thrust into the Ministry of Jesus Christ, untaught by MAN, but by the living Christ through His written Word, in the manner in which I was. I didn't realize it yet, but I was being brought into His Ministry by the living Christ in a manner UTTERLY UNIQUE, and totally unlike any other of which I know! (*Autobiography*, pp. 318–319)

Mr. Armstrong compared his special calling to that of the Apostle Paul. Notice his statement in the November 29, 1954, *Co-worker Letter*, which he repeated many times over the years:

And so I say to you, as the Apostle Paul said to those at Galatia: I certify you, brethren, that the GOSPEL which is 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. . . . When it pleased God, who . . . called me by His grace, to reveal His Son in me that I might preach Him to

the world; immediately I conferred not with flesh and blood—neither went I to any sect or denomination or human theologian, but I went directly to the WORD of GOD, on my knees, corrected, reproved, and instructed in God's righteousness and TRUTH.

So, like the Apostle Paul, Herbert Armstrong claimed to have been chosen and inspired by God in those things which he taught. But did he ever claim that this *revelation process* took place in *the very same way* as God taught the Apostle Paul?

The Apostle Paul, telling us under God's inspiration of how he came to KNOW God's Truth, said: "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." He received it, as he implies, from an appearance of the living Christ, in person, even after His resurrection and ascension.

I, too, received Christ's Gospel NOT from MAN. I, too, certify that the Gospel I have taught and proclaimed is NOT AFTER MAN. I entered no theological seminary, where I would have received a particular denominational teaching and set of doctrines and practices. I was not taught by MAN. But I was taught, as was Paul, by the revelation of Jesus Christ—Paul from the living Christ IN PERSON—who is the Word of God in PERSON—but I from the WRITTEN WORD OF GOD—which is the SAME revelation, now set in print (*Tomorrow's World*, February 1972, "Personal from the Editor").

This is precisely what Herbert Armstrong claimed *consistently* over all of the years of his ministry—that God did indeed reveal through him *real Truth* which the world's religions had never understood, but he claimed that *the process* by which God performed that miraculous revelation occurred as he sought understanding through *his study of the Bible*. Do not confuse this with the idea that anyone who chooses can sit down with a Bible and "figure out" the truth. Millions attempt to do exactly that, but they all arrive at very contradictory conclusions. Since the one true God cannot be the source of so many disjointed theories, all of these "Bible scholars" cannot therefore be legitimate. Mr. Armstrong never claimed that the way in which God worked with him was also open to everyone else to copy. He did indeed claim to have been a *specialty chosen* instrument through whom God made special revelations known, which were hidden from others. But we find no evidence that he ever claimed to have received that revelation in some supernatural setting.

Neither did he claim to have received that body of knowledge all at one time. In fact, from the beginning he readily emphasized that God taught him *one doctrine at a time* over a protracted period of years.

In these beginning years of my ministry I went along with many of these religious practices—and even some doctrines—commonly accepted by the evangelical denominations, and which I later had to UN-learn. I had to learn one doctrine, and one truth, at a time (*The Plain Truth*, November 1959, p. 9, "The Autobiography of Herbert W. Armstrong").

In a separate chapter we will address in detail this crucial topic of "admitting error," and show how the original meaning of "correcting error" had subtly changed by the 1960s. In the earliest years, Mr. Armstrong cited his willingness to "admit error when proven wrong" as another proof of the true Church, but back then, his purpose was the progressive expulsion of more and more *falsehoods of past Protestant tradition*. At some point, this principle morphed into an instrument used—especially after the 1960s—to begin dismantling key doctrines of the church which previously had been ascribed to God's *special revelation*. But at this point, it is sufficient to note that Mr. Armstrong did indeed claim a unique calling by God to be a minister of Jesus Christ, as well as being an instrument through whom real Truth was revealed.

Recall that Mr. Tkach implied in his book the notion that if Mr. Armstrong did not have a *Sinai revelation experience*, and if he did not receive special knowledge in one session—like having truth "pour directly from the Godhead into his mind"—we are asked to discount his entire legitimacy. He further asserts that he and his father were the ones who first helped to enlighten members of the Worldwide Church of God to these facts, even though members were thoroughly taught the history of Mr. Armstrong's calling, commission, and source of inspiration over decades of his writings. How exactly should any member of the church have ever believed Mr. Armstrong received his knowledge in the very same way that Moses or the Apostle Paul had been inspired? We find no record of any such claim.

All Doctrines Copied?

What about Mr. Tkach's claim that Mr. Armstrong had never really offered any "new truths," but merely doctrines which had been copied from other religionists, especially Protestants? Here again is what he wrote:

. . . Here's our challenge: You know the distinctive teachings of Herbert Armstrong; now you name the teaching and we'll tell you where it came from. We'll show you what preceded Herbert Armstrong and demonstrate that the teaching was *not* specially revealed to him and it *wasn't* restored from the first century" (*Transformed By Truth*, p. 88).

Mr. Tkach then describes the results of his challenge to church members:

When someone takes us up on this challenge, almost always the first doctrine to be mentioned is *the Sabbath*. "Sorry!" I say. "The Seventh-day Baptists had that first, long before Mr. Armstrong." You should see the looks on people's faces as we start naming the origins of one doctrine after another (*Transformed*, p. 88).

But again I ask, when did Herbert Armstrong ever claim he was the first to teach that the seventh-day Sabbath should be kept by Christians? Did not he write very specifically and repeatedly about his first experience in 1926 with proving the Sabbath? All members of the church became well versed in the story of Mrs. Armstrong becoming convinced by a neighbor that Saturday was the true Sabbath, and Mr. Armstrong's vehement opposition to this notion. Here is one of many references he made over the years to that history:

. . . It was then that a Bible-believing woman, neighbor of my parents in Salem, Oregon, convinced my wife that the Bible enforced observance of the seventh-day Sabbath in this New Testament time of grace! The facts of my outraged reaction at the "religious fanaticism" have been published many times.

I was unable to talk, reason, argue, cajole, or threaten her out of her newfound conviction. I was literally angered into my first STUDY of the Bible—to PROVE to her that "all these churches couldn't be wrong"—and that the Bible commanded and enforced the observance of Sunday, in the New Testament period (*The Plain Truth*, September 1964, "Personal from the Editor").

How did that neighbor woman already know about the Sabbath in 1926? She was a member of a seventh-day church whose history was well established. Small as that movement was compared to Sunday-keeping churches, there was nothing new about Sabbath-keeping Christians. And yes, Mr. Tkach is correct that the Seventh-day Baptists were certainly part of that history.

Why then does Mr. Tkach imply that Mr. Armstrong had taught that he himself had originated Sabbath-keeping? How could any Worldwide Church of God member ever become *shocked and disillusioned* to "discover" this fact for the first time in the 1990s? There is no way any member of that church should ever have imagined that Herbert Armstrong was the first to teach Christians to keep the Sabbath. He never claimed it!

Again, the implication seems to be that if Mr. Armstrong was not the originator of a particular religious concept, he was not an inspired servant of God, and the doctrine must not be true either. But how does the validity of the seventh-day Sabbath rest upon Herbert Armstrong? Either the Bible certifies the validity of the Sabbath, or it does not. And many (though a very small percentage of all claimed Christians) over the centuries have recognized that the Sabbath was instituted for all of mankind from the beginning of Creation. Herbert Armstrong was admittedly a latecomer to that knowledge. But he certainly became the most effective minister in the twentieth century to spread that "old knowledge" and to convince many thousands to begin keeping it.

Revelation Through Technical Study

We have already seen that Mr. Armstrong claimed to have been inspired by God to begin understanding Bible truths as he engaged in an intensive personal study program. He did not claim this was a *carte blanche* method available to anyone else seeking to understand real truth, but stated that *he himself* had been *chosen by God* and blessed with special understanding which had eluded all other scholars. Notice how he describes that study process in more detail. Here is how he related that very first study to disprove the Sabbath:

I sought, wrote for, and obtained at the public library every book or booklet possible purporting to refute seventh-day Sabbath observance. I searched every nook and cranny of the New Testament to find sanctification, making holy, or command to observe Sunday. It was like hunting for the needle in the haystack—the needle that isn't there! (*The Plain Truth*, September 1964, "Personal from the Editor")

So Mr. Armstrong admits that he sought out scholarly books by every author he could find on the topic which he was studying. Here are some further references:

After much careful research, involving study of evolution—the writings of Darwin, Huxley, Haeckel, the earlier Lamarck, plus Spencer, Vogt, Chamberlain and other modern geologists and evolutionists—as well as a careful study of Genesis and other parts of the Bible—of all scientific facts bearing on the subject I could find—I became SURE! I had PROVED that God IS!

Next I entered an intensive study to determine whether the Bible can be PROVED to be the inspired Word of God—the revelation of knowledge from the Creator of mankind. By many infallible proofs, this was PROVED! (*Tomorrow's World*, February 1972, "Personal from the Editor")

These kinds of statements were so commonly repeated by Mr. Armstrong over the years that members certainly should have understood it was his *systematic practice* to gather as many scholarly works available to him in his search to verify real truth. And his consistent claim was that God led him *during these intensive studies* to pick out sound principles vs. the weak and unsubstantiated. His methodology had never been to lock himself in an empty room, waiting for God to bestow upon his mind *new and unique knowledge* from on high.

This brings us to the next challenge offered by Mr. Tkach. What other prominent teachings of Herbert Armstrong does he attempt to discredit, and why?

How about *the nature of man*? Sorry—the evangelist Charles Finney heavily influenced our former ideas on that. In fact, after Mr. Armstrong's death when my dad moved into his predecessor's office and cleaned out his desk, guess what book he found there explaining the nature of man? You guessed it—a work by Charles Finney (*Transformed*, p. 88).

First, the main principle which Herbert Armstrong and Charles Finney shared somewhat in common was a belief that man has an obligation to try to obey godly principles, as opposed to the most common Protestant idea that "Adam's fall" made it impossible to do so, and that even to try is a denial of grace. Finney taught that man has a choice, and that God would not have given him choice if there was no way for him to succeed in doing right. This is about as close a correlation as can be found between the two men's teachings. What is certain is that Charles Finney, although considered heretical by many mainstream Christians, was still an evangelical Protestant who rejected the seventh-day Sabbath and almost every other principle embraced by Herbert Armstrong. It is also certain that Charles Finney did not truly concur with the Radio Church of God teaching about the nature of man, which was well documented in the original *Ambassador College Correspondence Course* from the 1960s. (More on this topic in a future chapter, as *the nature of man* doctrine became pivotal as one of those which was subtly amended by the Worldwide Church of God in the 1970s.)

But does the fact that Herbert Armstrong read Charles Finney's works prove he copied from him, and even if so, that Mr. Armstrong's teaching on man's nature is erroneous? Again, the truth should either stand or fall based upon God's revelation in the Bible. Either the evidence is there or it is not, regardless of who may have "first" gleaned some aspect of that truth. Since Mr. Armstrong made it very clear from the beginning that he was willing to embrace *bona fide principles* which could be substantiated as *truth*, regardless of the original source, how would that weaken the veracity of one of his teachings, to discover that another human being understood that same principle before Herbert Armstrong did?

Many Nuggets of Truth in the World

What Mr. Tkach seems to ignore is another cardinal principle taught by Herbert Armstrong over the years, that there are many *nuggets of truth* to be found *even among deceived peoples of this world*. The key is to recognize, not that all points of truth are *totally unknown*, but that man has never been able to *assemble them* together into the "big picture" necessary to solve his problems. Mr. Armstrong taught that Satan is the great deceiver of mankind by means of mixing truth with error. If Satan offered only pure falsehoods, it would never serve his purpose. His speciality is in *perverting* the truth of God! What makes deception so "deceptive" is the use of *a lot of truth* with just enough error to make the whole product corrupt and worthless to mankind.

If this assessment of man's knowledge within the world is true, what would that then mean to us? It would mean that the completed picture of God's *true way of life* does not include *exclusively* elements which are *totally foreign* to the scholars of this world! It is very likely that Satan has inspired some of those true principles to be understood as wrappings for his lies, like mixing bitter medicine within something which is sweet. It is easier to disguise the lie when enshrined within a basically sound principle.

What Truly Made His Work Distinctive?

In essence, what Herbert Armstrong claimed to have accomplished was not *figuring out all unique principles* which had never been discovered by any other man before, but to have been *miraculously led by God* to test each principle and to *correctly verify* which precepts had merit and which did not! Again, this orientation to searching out truth by examining the arguments of human scholars *one doctrine at a time* is *exactly what he did*, and what he *admitted* in his writings he had done over many years.

If that is true, why then should we become disillusioned to find that he had a library full of religious and scientific writings by this world's elites? And to the extent that one of those scholars understood a particular nugget of real truth, how does it discredit Mr. Armstrong that he identified that particular valuable principle out of myriad falsehoods and added it to the body of his own teachings? He claimed that this was the very process which God used to help him assemble the *full tapestry* of God's revealed way of life.

After building the case to discredit Mr. Armstrong's claims, Mr. Tkach finally goes on to acknowledge that he never claimed any *Sinai revelations*:

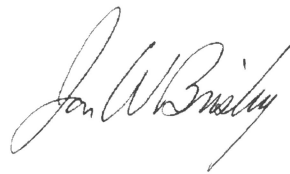
When he said something had been revealed to him, he did not mean that God had poured the new understanding directly into his waiting mind. No, whatever the new teaching happened to be, it usually came through a more human contact (*Transformed*, p. 90).

However, he provides this admission by relating an uncorroborated anecdote suggesting that Mr. Armstrong's definition of "revelation" was *accidentally discovered* by a particular close acquaintance. The implication remains that laymembers of the church were basically duped into believing that he had received a sudden inspiration of all truth, similar to Paul being struck down on the road to Damascus, and upon being finally enlightened, church members became highly disillusioned. Each of you must decide whether that version of history seems to have any substance.

What you are going to find as we continue forward with this analysis is this: what made Herbert Armstrong's work truly *unique* was not that every single element of his teaching *in itself* was revolutionary. As Mr. Tkach correctly points out, that is not really so. Yet who can deny that Herbert Armstrong's overall work was absolutely distinctive? The very fact that his detractors refer to it as *Armstrongism* confirms the point. If the total body of doctrine which Herbert Armstrong professed was really nothing special, why are Joseph Tkach and others even talking and writing about it? Why are you taking the time to read about it now? If his work was merely copied from other men, how did his legacy become so unusually distinctive?

What you will discover is that *the body of doctrines* which Herbert Armstrong assembled was absolutely distinctive and unmatched by any other man. The only real question is, was that body of doctrine professed by Herbert Armstrong a manifestation of the true Jesus Christ, or was it not? We will continue that analysis next time, including a look at his teaching on British Israelism.

Until then, all my love and appreciation for you in our Savior's glorious name,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Jon W. Brisby". The signature is fluid and elegant, with a large initial "J" and a long, sweeping underline.

Jon W. Brisby