

March 2012

Dear Brethren:

In past issues of this *Monthly Letter* we have been analyzing the history of that unique religious work performed in the twentieth century by Mr. Herbert W. Armstrong. We have examined the sources of his teachings and the orientation behind fundamental doctrines of the Radio Church of God as distinguished from all other religious movements. That church made a significant mark on the religious world by its astonishing growth from the 1940s through the 1960s and by its use of radio and television to spread a unique message in many places around the world. Whether one appreciated that message or despised it, what is true is that it could not be ignored. The momentum of that growing church catapulted it through the 1960s under a full head of steam. But then the internal upheaval and scandals within the Worldwide Church of God (WCG) manifesting in the 1970s brought public attention for a very different reason. An ideological tug-of-war played out over a number of years as competing, influential personalities sought to define or redefine the church. Ultimately, by the time Herbert Armstrong died in 1986, rather than having *solidified* the church foundation to provide a *durable platform* to preserve his doctrines and convictions, the stage had been set instead for *even more volatile changes* which would ultimately tear that church apart before the next decade was out.

That is a very concise summary of past history. But in the aftermath of so much turmoil over so many decades, where does that church stand today? The purpose of this installment is to provide a generalized snapshot of the current state of *Armstrongism* in the early twenty-first century. (Please note that although "Armstrongism" is considered by many to be a derogatory term, it is used here merely to identify the movement at large, as viewed from the perspective of the outside world.)

Where Did the Church Go?

Because the past writings of Herbert Armstrong are readily available and easy to stumble upon today—especially on the Internet—new generations of Bible students are yet discovering them for the first time. But what a shock when they seek to contact the church which originally published all that material. What happened to the Worldwide Church of God? After some digging, they discover there is no longer a church by that name, but the residual organization has been *renamed* Grace Communion International (GCI), since 2009. Upon further examination they find this church embraces mainstream Protestant theology (now a member of the National Association of Evangelicals) and no longer supports the teachings of Herbert Armstrong in any way. Being moved to *reject* Protestant theology, these

new students find that they have simply been led in a circle right back to where they began. If one desires affiliation with a church professing born-again Trinitarianism which abolishes the law of God, why join GCI when there are dozens of local denominations in every town where such doctrines are promoted? OK then, so now what? Is there anyone else teaching what Herbert Armstrong describes in these fascinating books and articles?

Next, emerging onto the scene are other church names seemingly associated with the Worldwide Church of God and claiming Herbert Armstrong as their source of inspiration. But not just one or two churches: hundreds of them! What is all of this about? Begin to examine a few of the most prominent groups and it becomes even more confusing. At first blush, they seem to be very similar in beliefs, and they even portray themselves with a very similar style. Why then are they not all together in one fellowship?

Out of a single, dynamic and unified church under Herbert Armstrong, how did it ever come to this? Do any of these remnant groups have any potential legitimacy? Most of them claim to be "the one," to the exclusion of all others. How would one even begin to assess them? Perhaps the very fact of their *splintered confusion* is evidence that the whole concept of "Armstrongism" was a farce from the beginning. Maybe it thrived only as long as a "master-charlatan" pulled the puppet strings to promote and sustain the movement. Perhaps after Mr. Armstrong died, his whole theology collapsed under its own weight, finally having been exposed as one great unsustainable personality cult. These are the kinds of questions and considerations confronting potential converts, not to mention many thousands of confused former members.

For those who resist throwing up their hands and just walking away in disgust—because there is still something *just too compelling* about Armstrongism to escape its orbital pull—how would they even begin to proceed to sift through the current confusion?

A Demographic Snapshot

It would be much easier to catalogue all of the remnant fellowships spawned from the Worldwide Church of God over the last forty years if they would all just "stay put" for a while. But there is nothing remotely static about this collection of churches. While a certain percentage of them have remained fairly stable over time, many others have come and gone like ducks on a pond. New groups spring up continually, and former groups disappear just as rapidly. How many total groups are there today claiming some portion of "Armstrong doctrines"? In spite of the perpetual volatility, there still *seems* to remain at least three hundred registered groups.

A number of individuals have tried to create directories of the splinter groups during the last twenty years. Those lists are never accurate for very long (if ever). Grace

Communion International provides a directory on their website based upon information available to them back in 1997. That list included over one hundred registered churches. Within ten years, other online directories listed more than three hundred, even though some of those groups have website addresses which seem to have been suspended. With such a volatile life-cycle for many fellowships, the total number of groups that *ever once existed* or *may still exist* could be much greater. Note too that this does not include many small groups that have resisted public attention but still exist in some kind of organized structure within local areas.

The advent of the Internet in the mid-1990s provided the first opportunity to begin capturing demographic information more readily. As groups began to use the Internet to promote their "works," it became easier to find and document many of them. It is also interesting to note that the largest proliferation of new groups began to surface at the very same time that the Internet began catching on—right after the Worldwide Church of God rejected the seventh-day Sabbath and openly embraced Protestant tenets in 1994. Prior to this time, the total number of breakaway groups (mostly formed in the 1970s) was relatively small and more easily identified. But after 1994 it was a very different story. Once the "mass exodus" from the Worldwide Church of God started that year, an explosion of new groups began appearing.

Generally speaking, there are about twenty distinct groups who claim to have at least 300 or more members. The single largest of these claimed about 20,000 members until recently, but internal strife caused a major split in 2011 which is still sorting out. The next largest groups claim about 8,000, 6,000, and 4,000 members respectively. Below that, the next four in size claim anywhere from 1,000 to 2,000 members, but after that it quickly drops to groups having between 300 and 500 members. Please note that all of these estimates are "self-reported" or anecdotal, which is anything but reliable. There is much incentive to appear stronger in numbers as a way to claim credibility as the *true heir* to Herbert Armstrong's legacy. It is also very likely that some of the *very same* people are being counted as members by multiple groups. There are many today who receive literature from many different organizations and fellowship with different groups on a round-robin basis.

But for those who truly seek to evaluate the differences in ideology, is there any way to sort these groups into more manageable categories for classification? Most certainly. While many of them claim to be absolutely unique, there are specific ideologies and philosophies which engender natural sub-groupings. If you start with these *major identifiers* in mind, it becomes much easier to overcome the confusion and to make sense of the current landscape.

What are some of these distinctive ideologies which permit us to make more sense of what is left of Armstrongism today?

Government and Individualism

Perhaps the first best way to identify a key philosophical difference between these remaining groups is to ask about their concept of church government. It is also something which most of them readily disclose. It is probably the most sensitive and charged topic among former members of the Worldwide Church of God, and also likely the catalyst which is most responsible for the proliferation of so many remnant groups to begin with.

Some defend the kind of *top-down government* which prevailed under Mr. Armstrong for fifty years. Others absolutely reject that "hierarchical" structure. From the inception of the Radio Church of God in 1934, Mr. Armstrong was never "subject" to a board of directors, but always held the authority to make every final decision unilaterally as the head (later confirmed under his title as Pastor General). This included ecclesiastical as well as administrative judgments as sole leader of that physical organization. Most of these remnant groups today are either adamant to support that same (or similar) structure, or else to repudiate it entirely. There is very little middle ground. So if one is personally adamant about church government from his own interpretation of the Bible—from either viewpoint—this is the first best litmus test which can be applied to begin to classify the remnant groups.

On one side are those who came to view "one man rule" as *the great evil* which destroyed the church. Within this category are those who trusted *Mr. Armstrong himself* to wield such power, but no one else. If the man at the top is sincere and defends the doctrine, then such power in his hands is a good thing, they believe. But after Mr. Armstrong's death in 1986, that same unilateral power passed directly into the hands of a successor who did not share his predecessor's love of the doctrine. Within eight years, Joseph Tkach—followed by his son, Joseph Tkach, Jr.—repudiated the entire foundation of Armstrong doctrine, and because of the church's government structure, there was nothing anyone could do to stop it. No board had the power to veto the Pastor General's unilateral changes. Therefore, one of the major new ideologies emerging in the 1990s was the need for *a democratic governing board* at the top to prevent the possibility of a repeat of that same history. If a quorum of elected church elders was required to approve any major changes, then there would be some built-in protection against treacherous, unilateral actions.

By contrast, some of these new groups were started by men who defended the original government structure of the church, rejecting any form of democracy as being against biblical principles, no matter how well-intentioned. They have established themselves with authority over their new churches in a manner similar to Mr. Armstrong's example.

There are others who reject the former top-down structure for personal reasons. Having been victims of "abuse" by ministers in the parent organization who used their authority unkindly and unwisely, the whole concept of ministerial authority became anathema to many. While Mr. Armstrong was still alive, many labored under that *heavy-handed* administrative philosophy because they believed this was "God's Church," and to leave that church would be

to leave God. However, they were accumulating progressively a closet full of resentments and hurt feelings because of the way they had been treated under that institutional hierarchy. The dam held in large part while Mr. Armstrong was still alive, but once those members who rejected the new Protestantism of the 1990s were forced out of the "new" WCG, the waters could be restrained no longer, and many newly-forming remnant groups decided to solve the *government problem* while they were at it. These groups go out of their way to advertise themselves as being more open and inclusive—sharing the ministerial stage with many individuals—and governing themselves with democratic policies. To them, "hierarchy" is a dirty word, and any top-down structure is totally incompatible with "servant-based" leadership.

Among hundreds of ministers of the former Worldwide Church of God who were forced out in order to preserve fundamental Armstrong teachings in the 1990s, there was no clear "heir apparent" for the laity to embrace. Many of these ministers therefore decided to stake their own claim to the mantle of *successor* and "hang out a shingle," set up shop, and begin to do business. What was the effect? Many of these long-term members of the parent church who had never had any options other than to "stay put," suddenly found themselves presented with *a whole new smorgasbord* of options. Close-held personal views about church government became—for many—the number-one criteria used for selecting a new fellowship. The "hierarchical top-downers" picked a group whose leader defended the "old" system, while those who resented ministerial authority in general exclaimed, "Never again!" and promptly chose a group that celebrated *individualism*.

The Emergence of Choice

Note that the 1990s did not produce the first instances of this phenomenon in the Worldwide Church of God. Remnant groups had already begun to form—separate and apart from the parent body—from the early 1970s while Mr. Armstrong was still alive and leading the church. Those early traumas hinged upon doctrinal disputes as high-ranking ministers under Mr. Armstrong lined up either to preserve long-held teachings or else to "relax" them, according to either their liberal or conservative leanings. Some "liberals" left because they did not get sufficient changes fast enough, while other "conservatives" were forced out for unwillingness to countenance *any change* to doctrines which they attributed to God's divine revelation. Mr. Armstrong began approving significant changes in 1974 to appease the liberals, especially his own son, Garner Ted Armstrong. Yet by 1978, that gulf in doctrinal ideology was still far too wide, and the son was finally forced out. While past breakaway groups had been relatively small and largely invisible to the public, once Garner Ted Armstrong used his public image to found a new church in 1978, for the very first time in church history there was a significant rival to offer members *a choice* in fellowship. No longer was there only *one place* to go to practice some form of Armstrongism. The 1970s fostered *the first major cracks* which would ultimately fracture into wide and spidery chasms twenty years later.

Ultimately, there became a market for any and all viewpoints, so thousands divided themselves along ideological lines and picked a new fellowship according to their personal preferences. Never had these members within one, regimented parent body been handed so much *freedom to choose*.

Another consequence of having so many new fellowship choices was that many members inadvertently became *transients*. Where once they had been rooted so strongly in the parent church and unwilling to budge—no matter what adversity they experienced—after they endured *the first trauma of separation*, followed swiftly by *the liberation of choice*, it became much harder for many of them to ever put down solid roots. Some certainly did so, but many lost their former willingness to tolerate *any level of negativity* which might arise (and is common within all organized fellowships). Become upset at any minister, laymember, doctrine, or administrative ruling? Simply decide to "vote with your feet" and separate once again. After all, why commit to one particular group and put up with its inevitable internal "people problems" when it is so easy just to pick up and move to another? With so many groups to choose from now, there is no need to grasp onto any single one like the sole-remaining life raft. And so "churning of membership" became a new reality among these remnant groups.

Today, it hardly requires any past celebrity recognition or ministerial credentials (like Garner Ted Armstrong enjoyed) to start your own remnant church. Especially with the advent of the Internet, all one needs is a low-budget website and the personal conviction that he (or she) has been called by God to "do a Work," and then it's *off to the races!* If a former minister—or even a laymember—of the church becomes disgruntled with his current fellowship, and if no other existing remnant group strikes his fancy, not to worry. Just start one of your own! This is precisely the mentality which has predominated since the breakup of the parent body and *freedom of choice* has been popularized. Over the last thirty years we have seen the *number of groups* growing in large part because of "splits from splits of splits." This does not imply at all that the total number of members practicing some form of Armstrongism is increasing, but more likely that the groups over time simply continue to splinter further and to divide the faithful among ever smaller fellowships. As a side note, if one cares at all about the *relative credibility* of the leader of a particular group he may be considering, examination of his *ordination history and resume* under Herbert Armstrong and the Worldwide Church of God is another good test which might matter to some in classifying the remnants.

Opinions About the Patriarch

Another key measure to help distinguish these hundreds of remnant fellowships is their individual view about Mr. Herbert Armstrong himself. Was he an apostle? If so, what does that imply? If not, what was his real contribution as a servant of God? And what

influence, if any, does his legacy play in affecting future policies of the church? Evaluating how each remnant group answers these questions will highlight very strong distinctions in ideology.

On one side are those who believe Herbert Armstrong was an "apostle," and to them it means that every decision he ever made—whether of doctrine or administration—was backed up by God. Among some of these groups, a key test for membership is the requirement to pledge acceptance of Herbert Armstrong in this light. Some add the requirement of accepting that he was also the "last-day Elijah," fulfilling a specific prophetic office before the return of Jesus Christ. Although they would never admit it—and in fact resent the comparison—there is little difference between their view of Herbert Armstrong's scope of authority and that of the Pope within the Catholic Church. In both cases, they believe that a designated man has the power to "bind and loose" any doctrine or judgment, and that God backs it up absolutely. Common also to these particular fellowships are leaders who claim the same unlimited powers, now that they are the "successors" to Mr. Armstrong. If Mr. Armstrong was the modern-day Elijah, then the successor can be the modern-day Elisha, the prophet to whom the baton was passed in antiquity. And along with that mantle passes all authority of the predecessor, to bind and to loose with infallibility. Those leaders who add the claim of being a prophet likewise expand their authority to include making certified predictions about specifics of the future. It is also not uncommon to hear some of these church leaders claim to be one of the *Two Witnesses* of the Book of Revelation (Revelation 11:3), or one of many other prophetic titles. Among some of the largest of the splinter groups with this general philosophy are ones attempting to duplicate everything Mr. Armstrong did. Mr. Armstrong began a college, so they begin colleges. Mr. Armstrong had a grand auditorium, so they seek to build one also. Mr. Armstrong sought to warn the world to fulfill Matthew 24:14 with radio, TV, and glossy print media, so they must likewise *take up the torch* to complete his work. On this extreme side of the equation are those groups whose works definitely resemble that of a "personality cult." The focus is on *a man* in some way, whether it be Herbert Armstrong or the current successor.

At the other extreme are fellowships that reject that Herbert Armstrong was any apostle, let alone a prophet. Their writing and speaking exudes an underlying animosity for him, which is ironic. Ironic, because they hold many key doctrines in their foundations which were unique to the ministry of Herbert Armstrong, although they are loathe to admit it. For instance, they may preserve and teach the seven-thousand-year plan of God as depicted in the weekly Sabbath and annual Holy Days, as well as many aspects about the nature of God and man which made Herbert Armstrong stand out from all other religious works. They especially are likely to believe and preach that the purpose for human creation was the hope of being born into the God Family—to become "God, as God is." That is a teaching found *in no other church* except the one formed under Herbert Armstrong. Yet these groups simultaneously claim that Herbert Armstrong was no true Bible scholar, that his teachings were not inspired by God at all, and that he merely assembled doctrines according to his

personal whims of the moment. Leaders in many of these groups put much emphasis upon "credentials," claiming superior education, degrees, and training to confirm their access to "real truth." In the end, what it means is that they give themselves license to pick and choose what doctrines are valid, based upon their "superior" skills. Among these groups are leaders who are "doctors," and ones who write and teach as historical scholars. To them, any nuggets of truth Herbert Armstrong possessed, he acquired quite by accident, and these same truths would have been uncovered by more scholarly men sooner or later, with or without him. In essence, on this extreme side of the equation, the basis of the group's very existence derives from the work of Herbert Armstrong, but in actuality that patriarch is resented and despised. Fascinating.

Jewish Roots Movement

Another major category which has emerged today is Messianic Judaism, or the Jewish Roots movement. A significant number of former members of the Worldwide Church of God have gravitated to this philosophy, and in fact a number of the remnant groups forming out of that parent organization have embraced key concepts.

The basis centers on preserving many of the customs and practices of Judaism while at the same time accepting Jesus Christ as the true Messiah, which traditional Judaism would never countenance. It is easy to understand why this pre-existing movement would have become so attractive to so many members of the Worldwide Church of God after it began to disintegrate. Armstrongism and Messianic Judaism share in common the belief that accepting Jesus Christ as Savior does not mean abolishing the "Law of God." So these "Christians" mutually keep the seventh-day Sabbath and the annual Holy Days of Leviticus 23. They both adhere to the laws of clean and unclean meats, and many others. But they differ very strongly in many other ways. Herbert Armstrong rejected the validity of many "Jewish customs" as being those which Christ condemned as "the commandments of men" (Mark 7:7). It is a distinction in defining what is part of God's *spiritual Law*, vs. *uninspired human tradition*. One prominently disputed teaching is the "Sacred Name." Many of these Jewish Roots groups believe the only proper address for the Creator is His Hebrew name. It is interesting that Herbert Armstrong vociferously rejected this teaching from the earliest years as being superstitious nonsense. That was a position which he held without wavering until his death. Therefore, former members of the WCG who eventually joined existing Sacred Name fellowships (or new groups with similar tenets begun by former WCG ministers), certainly had to repudiate many doctrines of Herbert Armstrong in order to do so.

Treatment of the Calendar

Another very key teaching which has emerged to distinguish many remnant groups concerns the calendar. Which calendar has real legitimacy to tell us *which days* are God's

intended annual Holy Days? Herbert Armstrong confirmed the legitimacy of the Jewish calendar as the single calendar inspired and preserved by God. He taught that the Jews were in error *in their use of that calendar* to assign the dates for holy observances (like Passover and Pentecost), but that the calendar itself was inspired and preserved in the very same way that God made sure to preserve the authentic books of the Bible to come down through history.

Many of the splinter groups today choose to define themselves by their beliefs about God's calendar. It is a prominent point of distinction. In one camp are those who defend the Hebrew calendar used by Mr. Armstrong. This is probably still the most prevalent position. The Jewish Roots groups certainly agree on the validity of that calendar, but they often keep their holy days differently than did the WCG. Why? Because they disagree with Mr. Armstrong that the Jews were in error in their assignment of Passover and Pentecost. So they not only defend the calendar itself, but the authority of the Jews to *use* that calendar.

On the other side, a number of new groups that formed from the WCG reject the Jewish calendar altogether in favor of their own creations. They assert that God never inspired "the Hillel calendar" at all, but that it likewise is one of those "commandments of men." They seek instead to document "the calendar God gave Moses," even though they hardly agree on exactly what that calendar is or how it should operate. Because of such heated disagreement on this particular topic and wide promulgation of so many unique calendar formulas, this single doctrinal dispute constitutes *a major cause* for the existence of so many different fellowships today. After all, one of the strongest bases for unity is observance of Sabbaths and Holy Days. Groups that cannot meet together on the same holy occasions can hardly be part of the same fellowship. Today, besides church government, one of the first questions one can ask to help categorize these groups is to clarify which calendar they use, and how they use it. It is interesting that for so many thousands who were first taught by Herbert Armstrong to begin keeping those "Jewish Sabbaths," since his death those Holy Days are being kept *on many different days in many different months*, according to a variety of customized calendar rules. It is another example of *newfound freedoms* and the smorgasbord of options confronting those who seek *to preserve—or to adopt*—some form of Armstrongism today.

Stay-at-home Adherents

Another very significant category within Armstrongism today includes those who are not part of any organized fellowship whatsoever. This is the segment of adherents which is least possible to quantify. They have no Internet websites and seek to do no proselytizing "works." But they value many teachings of Herbert Armstrong and quietly practice them as best they can on their own.

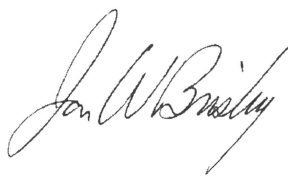
The motivation for avoiding formal membership in any particular group is varied.

For some, it relates to the church government issue. A significant number of former members are so "turned off" by authority and hierarchy issues in the "corporate churches" that they refuse ever to be part of one of them again as a matter of principle. That does not mean that they are not involved. There are many "floaters" who dabble with a number of different groups, listening to their recorded sermons and reading their articles (either by subscribing to multiple mailing lists or by anonymous consumption of website content). Some may attend the meetings of many different fellowships on Holy Days throughout the year, not as members, but as "visitors." During the fall festival of Tabernacles—which includes meetings on eight consecutive days—individuals in this category may "make the rounds" to several different groups that are hosting feast sites in the same general area. A common denominator of thought among individuals within this category is: 1) belief that God is not working through any one organized body today, so there is no necessity to "join up" in order to please God; 2) belief that there are *snippets of truth* which can be gleaned from many different ministries, hence the sampling from a wide variety; and 3) belief that the individual has the unilateral power and prerogative to "sift and sort" what concepts have value and are to be kept vs. what is to be discarded.

For others, the reason they are sitting at home is not because they are certain that God wants them to do so, but because they are simply confused about what they should do. For these, it is especially frustrating because they are hardly satisfied with the status quo. On one side, a nagging feeling makes them yearn to fellowship with others, especially to fulfill the "obligation" to appear before God on His commanded days. But on the other side, they are totally confused by the proliferation of so many groups out there, and unsure how even to begin to distinguish between them all. In that case, it is easier to "do nothing" than to wade into the swirling rapids of the river.

This is certainly not an exhaustive or even a scientific portrayal of the current state of that church, but it should provide an accurate snapshot of the issues of mind and motivations by historical experience which are yet playing out among those still attracted in some way to the unique principles taught by Herbert Armstrong in the twentieth century.

Yours with devotion in the service of Jesus Christ,

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

Jon W. Brisby