

October 2010

Dear Brethren:

In the February issue of this letter, we began to examine the question of the legitimacy of Mr. Herbert Armstrong and his twentieth-century work. Is it really reasonable to conclude that the Radio Church of God was actually the work of the Living God in this age? We certainly believe so, but is there *solid evidence* to support that belief for ones who may be honestly doubtful? We began by profiling the Biblical attributes of the true Church of God and what it must look like wherever it may be found. We identified five major attributes which help distinguish the true Church from all other claimants.

In summary, we saw that any true work of God involves a body which acknowledges:

- 1) God has instituted a time order in offering salvation to men, and no one decides of himself to become a Christian. He must be called. Relatively few are being called now, with the vast majority to be called only after Jesus Christ returns.
- 2) Israel is God's special people—His peculiar treasure—through whom salvation is being offered to all mankind. They are the firstfruits of His work among men. Ancient Israel was only a physical type. The New Testament Church is the true Israel of God, including members from all races and nationalities, made special—peculiar—by the gift of the Holy Spirit at baptism.
- 3) Legitimate spiritual Israelites humbly acknowledge their own worthlessness and express their gratitude for being called by God according to His pleasure. They do not justify contempt and disdain for anyone else, either in or out of the Body.
- 4) The true people of God honor the Ten Commandments. Anyone who claims those commandments were done away is denying the very Savior who confirmed them.
- 5) The Sabbaths of God are a distinctive sign (out of all of the laws) which acts as a beacon to differentiate the true Church of God from the rest of the world.

With these principles in mind, what other evidence might be available in the Bible to help us identify unique characteristics which differentiate God's true church—His peculiar treasure—from all others? What about the recorded history of the *behavior* of ancient Israel, the *behavior* of the first-century Church, and specific prophecies related to the *behavior* of a last-day Church? Did God prophesy what would actually happen to that Church—God's peculiar treasure? And if so, have any of those detailed events already transpired?

## Ancient Israel's Behavior

We have already seen that ancient Israel was called out from among all nations to become God's peculiar treasure. He promised to fight their battles for them and to deliver them against any enemy if they would honor their covenant promises with Him:

When thou art in tribulation, and all these things are come upon thee, even in the latter days, if thou turn to the LORD thy God, and shalt be obedient unto his voice; (For the LORD thy God is a merciful God;) he will not forsake thee, neither destroy thee, nor forget the covenant of thy fathers which he swore unto them. For ask now of the days that are past, which were before thee, since the day that God created man upon the earth, and ask from the one side of heaven unto the other, whether there hath been any such thing as this great thing is, or hath been heard like it? Did ever people hear the voice of God speaking out of the midst of the fire, as thou hast heard, and live? Or hath God assayed to go and take him a nation from the midst of another nation, by temptations, by signs, and by wonders, and by war, and by a mighty hand, and by a stretched out arm, and by great terrors, according to all that the LORD your God did for you in Egypt before your eyes? Unto thee it was showed, that thou mightest know that the LORD he is God; there is none else beside him. Out of heaven he made thee to hear his voice, that he might instruct thee: and upon earth he showed thee his great fire; and thou heardest his words out of the midst of the fire. And because he loved thy fathers, therefore he chose their seed after them, and brought thee out in his sight with his mighty power out of Egypt; To drive out nations from before thee greater and mightier than thou art, to bring thee in, to give thee their land for an inheritance, as it is this day. Know therefore this day, and consider it in thine heart, that the LORD he is God in heaven above, and upon the earth beneath: there is none else. Thou shalt keep therefore his statutes, and his commandments, which I command thee this day, that it may go well with thee, and with thy children after thee, and that thou mayest prolong thy days upon the earth, which the LORD thy God giveth thee, for ever (Deuteronomy 4:30–40).

But did God really expect that they would be a faithful and loyal people to Him? God was not so naive.

O that there were such an heart in them, that they would fear me, and keep all my commandments always, that it might be well with them, and with their children for ever! (Deuteronomy 5:29)

God knew the end from the beginning (Isaiah 46:10). And lest any should later believe He was surprised by the eventual outcome of ancient Israel, He made sure to prophesy through Moses exactly what He knew they would choose to do:

For I know thy rebellion, and thy stiff neck: behold, while I am yet alive with you this day, ye have been rebellious against the LORD; and how much more after my death? Gather unto me all the elders of your tribes, and your officers, that I may speak these words in their ears, and call heaven and earth to record against them. For I know that after my death ye will utterly corrupt yourselves, and turn aside from the way which I have commanded you; and evil will befall you in the latter days; because ye will do evil in the sight of the LORD, to provoke him to anger through the work of your hands (Deuteronomy 31:27–29).

God also prophesied what His own response to their faithlessness would be:

When thou shalt beget children, and children's children, and ye shall have remained long in the land, and shall corrupt yourselves, and make a graven image, or the likeness of any thing, and shall do evil in the sight of the LORD thy God, to provoke him to anger: I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day, that ye shall soon utterly perish from off the land whereunto ye go over Jordan to possess it; ye shall not prolong your days upon it, but shall utterly be destroyed. And the LORD shall scatter you among the nations, and ye shall be left few in number among the heathen, whither the LORD shall lead you (Deuteronomy 4:25–27).

And that is precisely what happened to them over many centuries. The Old Testament is largely a historical record of the failures of God's chosen people. Times of reformation and heartfelt reconciliation with God through the work of faithful champions (judges, kings, or prophets) were all too few and far between. Mostly, in spite of being given every possible advantage, Israel never appreciated it and repeatedly drifted back into lawlessness and idolatry. They did exactly what God prophesied they would do. And very often, it was the leaders of Israel—especially their priests—which were responsible for their national apostasy.

But they also have erred through wine, and through strong drink are out of the way; the priest and the prophet have erred through strong drink, they are swallowed up of wine, they are out of the way through strong drink; they err in vision, they stumble in judgment. For all tables are full of vomit and filthiness, so that there is no place clean (Isaiah 28:7–8).

And I brought you into a plentiful country, to eat the fruit thereof and the goodness thereof; but when ye entered, ye defiled my land, and made mine heritage an abomination. The priests said not, Where is the LORD? and they that handle the law knew me not: the pastors also transgressed against me, and the prophets prophesied by Baal, and walked after things that do not profit (Jeremiah 2:7–8).

But surely this failure only occurred with ancient Israel—that physical nation, right? Spiritual Israel—the New Testament Church—with the power of God's Holy Spirit indwelling, would never behave in that same way, would they?

### **Behavior of the First-century Church of God**

Unfortunately, the written history of the first-century Church—the true spiritual Body of Jesus Christ—was no better than that of the original *church in the wilderness* (Acts 7:38). Though called out of this world to become God's peculiar treasure, and sanctified by the gift of the Holy Spirit, within forty years of the death and ascension of Jesus Christ, they too corrupted themselves through perversions of the true doctrine and became largely cut off from God. Ironically, the Apostle Paul prophesied to the Church in God's name with an ominous warning about their future, just as Moses had prophesied earlier to Israel.

Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy [Spirit] hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood. For I know this, that after my departing shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock. Also of your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them. Therefore watch, and remember, that by the space of three years I ceased not to warn every one night and day with tears (Acts 20:28–31).

Not only did God prophesy through Paul that the true church would begin to champion corrupt teachings, but this perversion would likewise spring from the faithless acts of church leaders—the elders—who would cease to defend the Truth originally delivered to that chosen Body by Jesus Christ Himself!

Beloved, when I gave all diligence to write unto you of the common salvation, it was needful for me to write unto you, and exhort you that ye should earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints. For there are certain men crept in unawares, who were before of old ordained to this condemnation, ungodly men, turning the grace of our God into lasciviousness, and denying the only Lord God, and our Lord Jesus Christ. . . . These are murmurers, complainers, walking after their own lusts; and their mouth speaketh great swelling words, having men's persons in admiration because of advantage. But, beloved, remember ye the words which were spoken before of the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ; How that they told you there should be mockers in the last time, who should walk after their own ungodly lusts. These be they who separate themselves, sensual, having not the Spirit (Jude 3–4, 16–19).



So the legitimate body of Jesus Christ in the first century—the true Church of God—actually *abandoned the truth*, just like the original Israelites did. By the early 90s A.D., the Apostle John had been cast out of the physical assembly of the church, and was forced to minister to only a small scattered remnant left of those who still loved the original teachings.

I wrote unto the church: but Diotrephes, who loveth to have the preeminence among them, receiveth us not. Wherefore, if I come, I will remember his deeds which he doeth, prating against us with malicious words: and not content therewith, neither doth he himself receive the brethren, and forbiddeth them that would, and casteth them out of the church (3 John 9–10).

It was this perverted leader, Diotrephes (as well as many others across Asia Minor), who held sway with physical control of the assembly in that region, not the true apostles, like John. The main assembly—within forty years of the beginning of the Christian faith through the gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2)—no longer wanted to hear those foundational doctrines confirmed. They had moved on to teachings they considered to be better, but which God considered to be Baal worship. These were the "Church Fathers" of the late first century and second century who were responsible for repudiating Sabbath-keeping in favor of Sunday worship, embracing the foundation of the Trinity heresy to explain the nature of God, and every other perversion which became ultimately synonymous with *Christianity* so-called from that time down to the present.

But what about God's true church in our own time? Why should there have to be a modern-day parallel? After all, just because the first-century church became seduced from within through the subtleties of Baal worship, should we not expect the *legitimate* Church of God in our own time—founded upon the *true* Jesus Christ—to have remained faithful? What does the Bible say?

### **Prophecies of the Last-day Church**

The New Testament does not only record a history of what happened to the first-century church, but likewise many prophecies applying specifically to that Body which would exist *immediately prior and leading to* the Second Coming of Jesus Christ.

Now the Spirit speaketh expressly, that *in the latter times* some shall depart from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits, and doctrines of devils; Speaking lies in hypocrisy; having their conscience seared with a hot iron (1 Timothy 4:1–2) [emphasis mine throughout].

In fact, the Bible really applies *primarily* to that Church of the last days. Concerning all of the events chronicled in the Old Testament, Paul wrote:

Now all these things happened unto them for ensamples: and they are written for our admonition, *upon whom the ends of the world are come*. Wherefore let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall (1 Corinthians 10:11–12).

This includes those very prophecies Moses spoke concerning the "latter days."

For I know that after my death ye will utterly corrupt yourselves, and turn aside from the way which I have commanded you; and evil will befall you *in the latter days*, because ye will do evil in the sight of the LORD, to provoke him to anger through the work of your hands (Deuteronomy 31:29).

Moses was not just speaking and writing a condemnation of the Israelites of his own day. Remember, these were God's inspired words—not his own—and even without Moses' knowledge, God was recording a warning for the Church He intended to raise up in those days *just prior* to the end of this age. Many have assumed that Paul (and other apostles), by such statements about *the latter days*, were mistaken in believing they themselves would live to see the Second Coming of Christ. Is that true? Who is it who wrote these New Testament books, including every word within them? Was it God, or was it fallible men? Who is it who wrote:

For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first: *Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air*. and so shall we ever be with the Lord (1 Thessalonians 4:16–17).

By using the pronoun, "we", did Paul really believe that some to whom he was writing in the first century would still be alive *physically* at the return of Christ? What about this warning:

Now we beseech you, brethren, by the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, and *by our gathering together unto him*, That ye be not soon shaken in mind, or be troubled, neither by spirit, nor by word, nor by letter as from us, *as that the day of Christ is at hand* (2 Thessalonians 2:1–2).

Was Paul truly mistaken about the time of Christ's return? This is a common conclusion among many. But if that is so, then God allowed human error—the presumptions of false reasoning—to be recorded in His Holy Bible. Do you believe that

is true? If not, then what instead must be true? It actually confirms that Paul (as well as the other inspired writers) were only penning the words which God *dictated to them to be carried down to the last-day Church*—God's peculiar treasure—which would exist in the days *just before* the consummation of this age.

And as he sat upon the mount of Olives, the disciples came unto him privately, saying, Tell us, when shall these things be? and what shall be the sign of thy coming, and of the [consummation of the age]? And Jesus answered and said unto them, Take heed that no man deceive you. For many shall come in my name, saying, I am Christ; and shall deceive many (Matthew 24:3–5).

Why did Jesus Christ not only speak these words, but then assure that they were carried down in writing to our very time? Was it merely a historical record of a one-time conversation He had with those early disciples? Or was He recording a specific message for those He knew would be called in a much later generation? And if Christ's own words were for a last-day Body of believers, why is it so difficult to recognize that the words of Paul, Peter, Jude, and John were *likewise* recorded *by Jesus Christ* for the last-day Church?

What else did God's warnings through the apostles to that last-day church reveal?

This know also, that in the last days perilous times shall come. For men shall be lovers of their own selves, covetous, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, Without natural affection, trucebreakers, false accusers, incontinent, fierce, despisers of those that are good, Traitors, heady, highminded, lovers of pleasures more than lovers of God; *Having a form of godliness, but denying the power thereof*: from such turn away. For of this sort are they which creep into houses, and lead captive silly women laden with sins, led away with divers lusts, *Ever learning, and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth*. Now as Jannes and Jambres withstood Moses, *so do these also resist the truth*: men of corrupt minds, reprobate concerning the faith (2 Timothy 3:1–8).

This is not a condemnation of religionists of the world (Catholic and Protestant) who have *always* been deceived and have never yet been called by God. This is a prophecy concerning God's true people, the ones in the last days *who were called*, and *who did have* a chance to understand. As quoted above from 1 Timothy 4:1, Paul said, "in the latter times some shall *depart* from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits, and doctrines of devils." A man cannot depart from that which he never first possessed. To depart requires one first to have *known and understood* the Truth, even as Israel of old had been *given* that Truth, but then later forsook it. The church of the last days, wherever it may be, was prophesied to do the very same thing.

Preach the word; be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine. For the time will come when *they will not endure sound doctrine*; but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears; And *they shall turn away their ears from the truth, and shall be turned unto fables* (2 Timothy 4:2–4).

The true Church of God in the last days either already has, or yet will, turn away from the revealed Truth of God, just as its forerunners did. God said so.

Let no man deceive you by any means: for that day shall not come, except there come *a falling away* first, and that man of sin be revealed, the son of perdition (2 Thessalonians 2:3).

This phrase—"falling away"—is the Greek word, *apostasia*. It means, specifically, a defection from the truth! It is a last-day prophecy confirming that the true Church of God—His peculiar treasure—would *depart* from the truth upon which that Body would first be founded. That organized church would *begin* with the Truth as a revelation from God, but in time would change its teachings to embrace concepts which God despises.

What does this summary review tell us about attributes of the true church of God in the last days? If we are seeking to find the legitimate work of God, what should we be looking for as far as its prophesied *behavior*? It is not a church which begins with and holds firm to the correct teachings of God. If you are looking for a church which has always set a perfect example and continues consistently in good behavior and positive fruits, you are sure to miss it altogether. God's peculiar treasure of the last days is a body which will do exactly what its historical counterparts have always done. It will begin with the blessings of God in a miraculous work from its inception. But over time, it will allow men with nefarious personal agendas, especially its ministry, to destroy it from within:

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. . . . The anger of the LORD shall not return, until he have executed, and till he have performed the thoughts of his heart: *in the latter days ye shall consider it perfectly* (Jeremiah 23:1–2, 20).

### **So What About the Radio Church of God?**

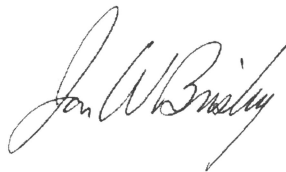
We are trying to answer the question, is it possible that the twentieth-century work of Herbert Armstrong was actually the inspired Biblical fulfillment of God's last-day

Church? Could the Radio Church of God potentially have been His peculiar treasure in our very own time? It is certainly a church which began with monumental impetus over the first forty years of its existence, and then gradually began to change its teachings as no other church in history has ever done, ultimately repudiating its very doctrinal foundation. It is also a church which began to splinter in the face of serious turmoil and internal strife, ultimately rejecting those members who still insisted upon holding to the original doctrines, and leaving those former believers scattered and disillusioned.

According to these Biblical prophecies, we certainly cannot rule out the legitimacy of that work under Herbert Armstrong at this juncture, because the Radio Church of God experienced exactly the kind of initial blessing and ultimate corruption which God indicated must absolutely come to pass. Perhaps those who are skeptical will still not be convinced. But it still merits following the trail and completing our investigation.

In future issues of this *Monthly Letter*, we want to summarize the basic doctrines which set Herbert Armstrong's work apart from all other churches. Did his teachings meet the Bible's *signature profile* of the true Church as opposed to the world's false notions of Christianity? Then we want to summarize some of the key historical events which occurred in the early formation and expansion of the Radio Church of God, likewise examining the institutional forces which came to bear upon that body over time. If it was the true Church of God, then it must have possessed those doctrines which distinguish it from all imposters. Did it? It must also have endured the eventual destabilization and destruction prophesied to befall that last-day Body. Many writers have tried to interpret that history. But all of these other writers have failed to recognize the underlying reasons for much of that which transpired. The true history is there for anyone who desires to confirm the facts and to consider it objectively. When evaluated without the entrenched preconceptions of most former members or the skepticism of disdainful onlookers, the actual facts are quite startling. It is a story that can be told, and it should be told. Until then,

Yours with love and conviction in that revealed Way,

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

Jon W. Brisby