

May 2019

Dear Brethren:

It is very exciting to announce to all of you that the manuscript for our new book, *A Peculiar Treasure: The Enduring Legacy of Herbert & Loma Armstrong*, has been completed. In fact, by the time you receive this mailing, the bookbinding company that we selected for the job, Taylor Communications, will be preparing the offset presses to create the finished work this very month.

Just as we did in the February *Monthly Letter*, this month's issue will offer you the chance to read one of the brand new chapters of the book that no one has read before. We hope that this material will help you and many of God's people to make sense of particular controversial events which occurred in our parent church during the twentieth century.

Chapter Nineteen **What About Mistakes and Bad Behavior?**

If the Worldwide Church of God was not God's true Church—His *peculiar treasure*—then where might it be, and what would it actually look like? What are you looking for, and how will you know if you find it?

Will the true work of Jesus Christ through human beings be ideal, physically? Will it exist in a state of near-perfect unity among all participants, without doctrinal dispute, and having human leaders who will always reflect the character of Jesus Christ Himself? Is that what you are looking for? Good luck in finding it! That is not a flippant statement to denigrate the possibility of finding Christ's Work on this earth. But it is an admonition against using a *faulty yardstick* that will *never* lead you to find real Truth. Why? Because that has never been the way Christ described the actual behavior of His *peculiar treasure*! Such a yardstick will *never* reveal *any physical assembly* that will ever measure up.

Oh yes, the Body of Jesus Christ will be known for love and unity (John 13:35). It will be known for faithful defense of revealed doctrine (John 14:15). But this is speaking of the *spiritual organism* in which the Holy Spirit is dominant in each true member. However, God's church has always existed physically as a *mixed multitude*, made up of all kinds of people in varying states of spiritual conversion (or lack thereof). At best, the physical assembly of those called by God is a hodgepodge of fallible human beings working to cast off the burdens of their ingrained wretched habits and carnal inclinations. At best, it

is a *hard slog* to put off the flesh, to let Jesus Christ truly *begin to rule in our lives* and to manifest the fruits of His Spirit. Some ministers and laymembers do so, but many in the end do not.

What Are You Seeking?

Those looking primarily for a church that is filled with "nice people" can go to any number of corner churches. It is especially easy among groups that believe God's Law is done away and that a person does not really have to change to be saved. Where there is no pressure or expectation of personal overcoming, there is a very "low bar" of expectation that makes it much easier for members to pat each other on the back and believe that they are all OK in God's sight. No pressure. Just "be nice." Everybody goes to heaven.

But that is not how the Bible defines the expectation for real salvation, and neither is it how the physical members of the "true church" are described by Christ. If no murderers, whoremongers, sorcerers, liars, idolaters, or abominable people will be allowed into God's Kingdom—and that is exactly what Jesus Christ said in Revelation 21:8, reinforcing *the hold* of the Ten Commandments—then the true Church, wherever it is found, will be made up of individuals *who know* that God requires them to *change their behavior*, because He will not accept them *just as they are*. Such individuals who are schooled in the need to become "overcomers" recognize that salvation is not really as easy as falling off a log. It requires the crucifixion of our natural impulses and concepts of mind, and the need to actually *walk in the footsteps* of Jesus Christ, not just to spout a lot of religious platitudes.

Now then, take a group of called individuals *like that*, put them in a physical assembly with others who are tasked with the very same quest, mix in a lot of individuals who are not really serious about the quest at all, and a dash of others who are actually there for more nefarious reasons, and you have *a perfect stew* of potential and predictable drama. *That* is the kind of church that Jesus Christ chose to assemble in the flesh. What is the evidence?

Just read the epistles of Paul, Peter, and John from the first century, and examine the problems that they were grappling with within *the true churches of God* at the time! Where is the blissful harmony? Oh yes, the Book of Acts records an initial flush of unity and oneness that prevailed when the church first began (Acts 2:44–47; 4:32–34). But that was very short-lived indeed (like a honeymoon period), replaced within just a few years with all kinds of internal strife, gross personal sins of weakness, doctrinal argumentation, political debate, and the misbehavior of shepherds who did not remain loyal to the revealed Truth.

And I, brethren, could not speak unto you as unto spiritual, but as unto carnal, even as unto babes in Christ. I have fed you with milk, and not with meat: for

hitherto ye were not able to bear it, neither yet now are ye able. For ye are yet carnal: for whereas there is among you envying, and strife, and divisions, are ye not carnal, and walk as men? (1 Corinthians 3:1–3)

It is reported commonly that there is fornication among you, and such fornication as is not so much as named among the Gentiles, that one should have his father's wife. And ye are puffed up, and have not rather mourned, that he that hath done this deed might be taken away from among you (1 Corinthians 5:1–2).

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 20:29–31).

That is the New Testament record God gave to us to describe His *peculiar treasure* of the day! Sadly, in spite of having access to the power of the Holy Spirit to help them behave differently, many of them instead followed in the very footsteps of the ancient Israelites—God's *church in the wilderness* (Acts 7:38)—the first rendition of His *peculiar treasure*. Is this shocking? It should not be if we simply read the entire biblical record with open eyes.

By the end of the first century, very few had held firm to the true Faith. The physical—organized—church had been taken over by men who did not love the original revelation. By the 90s A.D., the Apostle John had been *put out* of his own church!

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).

But Jesus Christ did not orchestrate all of this for our failure. All of it is part of His *ingenious program* to produce *real spiritual character* out of a crucible of serious trial. Salvation is not easy, but it is very much *achievable*—possible for any of those called ones who come to *love that Way* enough to fight for it.

What then can help make such a *wobbly construct* of a physical church—like the one Christ assembled—successful? Firstly, the power of God's Holy Spirit helping many to be

transformed in mind *in spite of the negative pressures*—pressures both inside and outside of the body. Secondly, *good leadership* of shepherds who are applying *real wisdom* in the administration of their duties. The whole enterprise, as Christ designed it, is very much like a house of cards—extremely fragile and merely *one wrong move away* from disaster. But it can stand, nevertheless, if Christ's rules for both laymember and minister are followed. Often, those rules *are not followed*, and that is why bad fruits manifest. But wherever Christ is truly working, there will indeed be a *vestige of legitimacy*, even if you have to look more closely to find it.

Is the WCG Ruled Out?

According to a *realistic measure* in evaluating the *physical* assembly of God's true church, the Worldwide Church of God cannot be discounted at all. The fact that this organization over time became wracked with division, infighting, bad behavior of many ministers and laymembers alike, watering down of revealed doctrines, and the ultimate implosion of its empire, does not prove that it *could not have been* God's true church. Many have drawn that conclusion, citing documented "bad fruits." But in fact, it actually makes it *more credible* that this might actually have been the church that God raised up in the twentieth century! If that seems the reverse of good logic, then pray tell, where is the biblical evidence for the *fairytale manifestation* of a *physical church* that many have demanded to see? It simply does not exist that way. It never did exist that way in the past, and God prophesied that His last-day church would do *all of the very things* that the WCG ended up doing. Here are just a few examples:

Jesus said He would build a church, the leadership of that church would bear His authority, and that this church would never perish (Matthew 16:18–19). The WCG was built as an unusual and amazing church from the 1930s through the 1960s, Herbert Armstrong claimed God's authority to guide that church, and remnants of that work still survive today because his teachings which have *intrinsic value* have never been eradicated.

That Church was to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ—His inspired message and instructions (Mark 16:15). Herbert Armstrong proclaimed the Gospel—the *Good News* of the coming Kingdom of God—and that message touched thousands around the globe.

That very Church that Christ built would go astray—apostatize from revealed Truth (Acts 20:28–31; Jude 4, 18; 2 Timothy 3:1, 5; 4:3–4; 2 Peter 3:3–4). The WCG changed its foundational teachings which had been so blessed during its first forty-year history, reverting over the ensuing twenty-year period to *the very same false teachings* that original members had initially renounced as *empty and unsatisfying*.

This is what Jesus said His church would be like, and what it would eventually do, and that is exactly what the WCG was like, and what it eventually did. What other religious denomination that you know of today fits that model nearly as well? There is none!

When a *legitimate church* that God raises up *falls away* from Him and separates from revealed Truth, there is a reason. It would never happen if the ministry and its core members insisted upon remaining faithful. The only way such a *prophesied apostasy* can take place is for serious mistakes to occur, God's Holy Spirit as a guiding force to be quenched, gross negligence to ensue, and serious sins to overtake those who were once faithful.

You can never *apostatize* (fall away) from Truth, if you did not first *possess Truth!* Deceived peoples of the world cannot commit apostasy. They have never yet had that Truth revealed to them. What is the only group of people who can possibly fulfill the very prophecy that Christ said would befall His own church? It must be His own called—legitimate—sheep! They are the only ones who can fulfill this prophecy. There is no other possibility.

With that premise in place, let us now examine the tabloid accusations that have been leveled against Herbert Armstrong and the Worldwide Church of God over the past fifty years.

Anatomy of Accusation

For many years there have been provocative and salacious accusations made against key figures within the Worldwide Church of God, and Mr. Herbert Armstrong in particular. Once internal strife broke out in the 1970s and ministers and members alike began to defect *en masse*, a number of "tell-all books" and other tabloid-style publications began to crop up. Especially heading into the 1980s and beyond, newsletters, books, and other media items began to be distributed by former members and ministers who now sought to destroy the very church they had once served with loyalty. The internet is rife today with all manner of "Armstrong hate sites."

Understand this distinction: There had always been detractors of Herbert Armstrong and his religious enterprise, but until the 1970s it had largely come from other Christian denominations that considered the WCG a dangerous cult. They sought to denigrate the doctrines (biblical exegesis) of Herbert Armstrong which challenged their "orthodox" interpretation of Scripture and which often set *mainstream* scholars back on their heels. But this *new brand* of hater was very different.

There is no adversary like the one who begins as a devoted follower but then flips one-hundred-eighty degrees. In chapter fifteen we spotlighted the main categories of individuals who became members over the years, including the ones who were there primarily out of fear of future world events—seeking to *save their skins*. But when the world did not end in the 1970s, leadership judgment began to be questioned, and then when the misbehavior of certain prominent church icons began to be divulged, many who had followed previously with blind faith now reacted with feelings of betrayal, disappointment, and embarrassment that they had ever been so "duped." Many just left the fellowship and faded back into the world, but some responded with greater volatility.

In some cases, ministers (or minister wannabes) who found themselves "outside the fold" sought a following of their own. One of the best ways to poach members from your former affiliation is to begin a campaign to vilify the parent body, sow discord, and thereby *shake loose* vulnerable members for your own new group.

Others just seemed to need a kind of *cathartic outlet* to cope with their own deep disappointments and hurt feelings. They became crusaders—as a "public service"—to try to expose the *real danger* of that *Armstrong cult* so that other unsuspecting people could be spared from being abused and taken advantage of as they now believe they had been. They became warriors for a new *humanitarian cause*.

Still others found solace in attacking the WCG for a different reason: Having separated for whatever *outward reason*, they carried with them a real sense of guilt that perhaps—just maybe—they had abandoned *the real Faith* and were now estranged from God. That is a terrible feeling, whether rational or not, and if it persists in the mind it becomes devastating. One solution was to return to that former faith in some way. But if that was not an option (for whatever reason), the only way for some to try to dispel the persistent guilt was to *convince themselves* that it *really was not* God's Church at all. If I can *convince myself* that it really was just a man-made cult, I am safe with God. Conscience clear. Therefore, let me become a consumer of every salacious accusation I can find against that church, and let me practice self-psychotherapy by sharing with others my own horror stories from my past affiliation. In so doing, maybe I can eventually convince myself that I did not really do the wrong thing.

That is just a brief summary of some (not all) of the motivations behind much of the anti-Armstrong literature that began to surface in the 1970s and beyond.

Are Exposés OK With God?

In general, what is a true Christian supposed to do if he/she finds out about the *private sins* of someone else? Is it a godly principle to expose secret sins as a way to *help defeat*

hypocrisy through a *militant purge*? Hardly. Oh yes, there are many biblical texts that emphasize the need to "call out" sin for what it is, but this is always speaking of *heresy*—blatant sin being espoused to try to teach God's people that wrong is actually right; to espouse something that threatens *the entire body*. That is very different than *a sin of personal weakness* that one has not yet been able to overcome. If you do not understand the difference between heresy (spreading false doctrine) and personal weakness, then you will make serious mistakes in trying to apply God's instructions. He commanded that we do both—*show mercy* and *resist sin*. You cannot do both of them correctly without knowing the difference in application.

In any case, because all of God's commandments are *expressions of love*, wisdom to know when to reveal a sin vs. when to *cover* (not *cover up*) a sin requires one to have a sincere desire to create peace and harmony within the church. If someone is rabble-rousing within a group—being contentious and robbing the church of peace—that must not be tolerated. Call it for what it is and get rid of that cancerous influence. But if it is merely the weakness of a brother or sister of the faith—a weakness that one has not yet been able to master, though acknowledging it as sin—it would be a direct violation of godly wisdom to "expose" that person's private mistakes and not to provide time and patience for true repentance. Jesus indicted those who were hardhearted and cruel—lacking sincere love—and thereby becoming guilty of hanging a millstone around the necks of His dear children (Matthew 18:6).

A talebearer revealeth secrets: but he that is of a faithful spirit concealeth the matter (Proverbs 11:13).

He that covereth a transgression seeketh love; but he that repeateth a matter separateth very friends (Proverbs 17:9).

And above all things have fervent charity among yourselves: for charity shall cover the multitude of sins (1 Peter 4:8).

Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, ye which are spiritual, restore such an one in the spirit of meekness; considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted. Bear ye one another's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ (Galatians 6:1–2).

So the question is, concerning these individuals who have written tell-all books to reveal private sins of their targets within the WCG, is this very premise even remotely an expression of God's love? In other words, is that what Jesus would have done? You be the judge. Just understand that if you believe you need to read every salacious accusation written

against Herbert Armstrong to complete your investigation *of his legitimacy*, then at least recognize that you are choosing to *receive testimony* from individuals who are proving that they do not reflect God's Spirit or anything resembling a *Christian mind*. Anyone who would *choose to write* such a publication is proving an *inherent lack of moral character*. So just be careful not to be duped by their claims of innocence and *altruistic public service*.

And if it is necessary to put Herbert Armstrong *under the microscope* in order to be totally objective about him, how about applying *the very same standard* to these detractors? Perhaps we should be willing to delve into their personal histories to discover what "hidden secrets" existed in their lives which account for their taking part in such endeavors. After all, what's good for the goose is good for the gander. Who is to say they are credible? Maybe there are people who knew *them*, who will testify, third or fourth hand, about things somebody else saw or "witnessed." Should that kind of *hearsay testimony* not also be weighed, if you think as a general principle it is appropriate and needful to *find out all the dirt*?

Did They Ever Believe?

Part of anyone's credibility is showing a foundation of reliability. Many of these critical authors once chose to join the Worldwide Church of God—to become baptized and to devote themselves to seeking salvation in God's Kingdom. The official church doctrine always emphasized that making this commitment was *a very serious matter*, and should never be undertaken by anyone who is not absolutely sure. Prospective members were strongly advised to *count the cost* (Luke 14:28), and to be certain to *prove all things* (1 Thessalonians 5:21). Herbert Armstrong often repeated to his audiences, "Don't believe me; believe your Bibles!" Therefore, anyone who chose to get baptized into that faith was one who claimed to have performed that comprehensive *due diligence* and was *convinced* that it really was God's revealed Way of Life.

And yet, within a few years' time, these very ones who separated from the church and then began to make accusations, also began to claim they had been duped by a charlatan from the beginning. Well, if they are correct—and Herbert Armstrong was merely an opportunistic snake oil salesman—then what else does that prove? These individuals had *never really proven the Truth at all!* They were admonished to check out in their Bibles everything Herbert Armstrong preached and to verify if it were so. They supposedly did so and became convinced—by their own diligent investigation—that what he taught was the *real Truth!* But if, in the end, it was not the real Truth, why then did they not discover that during their own initial study? They had all of the tools. They were told to prove it for themselves!

Perhaps they never really did the work to put those teachings to the test. Instead, they must have subscribed to those church tenets because they were enamored by *the personality* of Herbert Armstrong, Garner Ted Armstrong, or some other *physical aspect* of that organization. Otherwise, if he has truly searched the Scriptures to verify the truth (like the Bereans did; Acts 17:10–11), then it matters not what any man does, minister or otherwise. Truth is truth! If he has proven it, then he believes it *no matter what another human being does*, now or in the future. And if instead, his commitment to a belief system is *ever contingent upon the future actions* of a minister, another laymember, an organization, etc., it is *glaring proof* that the command of 1 Thessalonians 5:21 was never really followed.

The *true believers* were the ones who discovered value in those doctrines taught by Herbert Armstrong which were found in *no other church!* They really did prove their veracity, especially by *practicing* those teachings. If you prove something *by living it* and you verify that blessings from God *actually derive from following His commandments*, then who should ever be able to take that "evidence" away from you in the future? No one!

So what do we say about those who supposedly proved it, followed it for a time, but then changed their minds and became enemies of that very same church—enough so to seek to destroy what they once professed to believe? Someone was either not diligent enough in their initial study, or else they allowed *superficial attractions* to bring them into the church rather than real interest in God's salvation plan.

The third category is also one that God warned about—legitimate children who *did indeed prove it*, but then later *forgot* all of those proofs because of severe tribulation (Psalm 78). Regardless of which reason it may be, whose fault is that? God will hold each individual accountable for himself.

Move Along—Nothing to See Here?

If you conclude that you are being advised *to ignore and to suppress* knowledge of gross impropriety in leaders of the Worldwide Church of God, and to refuse to consider that some (even many) might have done some really bad things, you are mistaken. That is not the point here at all.

This particular work—like no other before it—has attempted to show you the facts of what happened without resorting to salacious gossip to make a point. It has shown you evidence that *plenty of mistakes* were made over the years, but without attacking or maligning the good intentions of those involved. When possible, a summary of documented facts has been cast in the light of *possible motivations* behind the scenes, but without claiming the ability to read anyone's heart or mind.

That is why when addressing Herbert Armstrong's actions, you have seen most of the analysis taken from his own words. There is always much that is revealing, even without resorting to the testimony of avowed enemies. To discover what is truly important, it simply is not necessary to get down into the cesspits of character assassination. This assertion is not a way to try to deflect attention away from potential serious personal failings, but to point out the futility in trying to chase *real truth* by probing gossip and presumptions that come from others—especially those who are unreliable because they have an axe to grind.

Even in assessing the actions of Joseph Tkach, this work has focused upon *his actions and his own explanations of his actions*, rather than implying any evil intent. He may have been very sincere in what he did. Why not allow for that? It has *no bearing* on whether he was right or wrong in his doctrinal conclusions. Why not stick to *the issues*? It is all about judging the value of any religious doctrine on the basis of soundness of rationale from the Bible, rather than just attempting to "win" by attacking someone else's *personal character*. We have plenty of politicians who engage in *scorched-earth defamation of character* to try to "win power." They do not care if their opponent is really guilty of being "evil" or not. It is only about winning the prize. In those circles, trampling someone's character and reputation is considered *part of the price* of winning.

For us, why not instead stick to evaluating doctrinal issues? The *fundamentals of belief* of the Radio Church of God should either stand or fall based upon their own merits. If that church just might have been God's *peculiar treasure* in our time, then it will have redeeming value in its explanation of God's plan for human salvation, irrespective of the weaknesses of those who first brought those truths to our attention.

Do not forget that being innocent provides no firewall against personal attacks. If it were so, then Jesus, being perfect, would never have been maligned as a mentally unbalanced, carousing, gluttonous drunkard (Matthew 11:18–19; John 7:20). That point is not to try to change the subject or to obfuscate any man's mistakes. It is just a reminder that if you insist upon believing always that *where there's smoke there's fire*, then you likewise would have rejected the Savior because He was accused without mercy by His enemies. Just be very careful about taking personal accusations at face value. Consider the source.

The Very Greatest Indictment

If it is true that the Radio Church of God was indeed raised up by Jesus Christ as His *peculiar treasure* in our time—founded upon the revelation of *true doctrine* to a called people—then the very most serious sin that Herbert Armstrong committed as physical head of that church was allowing, while on his watch, God's Truth to be besmirched and

abandoned by covetous underlings. It was a mistake that permitted the personal faith of thousands to be destroyed, and it set in motion all of the chaos that resulted over the next twenty years. And lest you believe that this assertion in itself is an uncorroborated personal attack, again, weigh it from Mr. Armstrong's own words:

So I will just tell you now, that I myself, cannot see one scintilla of an argument so far that is going to overthrow the teaching of God's Church on divorce and remarriage. . . If we would do that, brethren, do you know what would happen in less than another three months? I'll bet you nearly hundreds and hundreds of members of the Worldwide Church of God would divorce and they would go out and marry someone else. And that would be the *end of the Worldwide Church of God*—and Jesus Christ would spue us out of His mouth. And anyone who does go and do that will get spued out. I have to warn you (Transcribed from audio recording of Herbert Armstrong Bible study on Divorce and Remarriage; Ambassador College Gymnasium; Pasadena, California; April 13, 1973).

Either this statement in 1973 is true, or else it is not true. You need no salacious personal exposé to confirm this as a mistake, if it was indeed the fulfillment of God's prophecy that His true church would go into apostasy (Malachi 2:14–16). You have already seen the public evidence of it from the history highlighted in Part II of this work. You only need to decide if you think it matters.

It would be so much nicer to believe that Herbert Armstrong made no serious mistakes in leading the church, and that the "real trouble" came only after he died. Again, there are plenty of other written works out there to reinforce that particular notion. But every one of those versions leaves much to be desired, and they do not address many nagging questions at the heart of the story which you have seen highlighted here. The point is this: Our confidence in the validity of Herbert Armstrong's legitimacy as a servant of God *is not dependent upon* making him out to have been virtually perfect. We need not chase every personal attack against him and then rebut it. Whether he secretly engaged in personal behaviors that were wrong is not germane to our belief that he offered us *something of immense value*. That doctrine he taught to the exclusion of all other religionists has value in and of itself.

As for the rest, God will indeed be the Judge of every one of us, and He knows what those secret intents of heart and mind have always been.

A Believer in Happy Endings

What if it is true that God purposely called and used a man in our time to establish His Church, but a man who had natural weaknesses that would manifest under pressure in his old age? What if God did this *intentionally* to assure that His prophecy of *a falling away* would come to pass as stated (2 Thessalonians 2:3)? What if God allowed this to happen for reason—to *verify* whether each member of that church was actually there because of *love for the revealed Truth*, or whether they were only following a man or a physical organization? What if God decided that there is no better way to show *what is truly in each member's heart* than to allow the very man through whom that Way of Life was preached to fall prey to a character weakness in his old age and permit the church to go astray? What if God could have prevented that personal weakness from manifesting by choosing to keep strong defenders of the faith surrounding Mr. Armstrong, like his faithful son Richard Armstrong, and his wife, Loma? What if it were possible—by taking a liberal influence like Garner Ted Armstrong *out of the way* instead of Richard—that the church might have had stronger leadership in the 1970s in order to rebuff attempts to water down God's Truth? What if God intentionally allowed that liberal son (and others) to gain power in that organization in order to help precipitate the prophesied challenge to sound doctrine?

And what if Herbert Armstrong was actually very sincere in his heart, and what if he came to recognize his error before he died and to repent bitterly before God, even if he was too weak physically by that time to be able to bring the church back to the original revelation (on doctrines like Pentecost, divorce and remarriage, etc.)?

Again, none of us can read hearts and minds. But because *the real legacy* of Herbert Armstrong is found in God's true plan of salvation—which we received by his preaching and no one else's—this author chooses to hope for that outcome, and to continue to respect and to defend his memory for all of the blessings that we received through his work. It truly changed our lives for the good.

In Christ's service,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Jon W. Brisby". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned centrally on the page.

Jon W. Brisby