

February 2020

Dear Brethren:

This month marks the forty-fifth anniversary of the founding of a little religious group named Church of God, The Eternal. Yes, it was exactly forty-five years ago—in February 1975—that Mr. Raymond Cole formally organized this remnant body by filing legal articles with the State of Oregon to register as a non-profit corporation. Mr. Cole made sure to emphasize that in doing so he was not seeking in any way to set up a church competing with the Worldwide Church of God. From its inception it was established *solely* as a haven for those who continued to value the spiritual work of Mr. Herbert Armstrong, but who nevertheless had been *thrust out* of that parent body because of conscientious defense of the original doctrinal teachings. Forty-five years later—and even since the death of Mr. Cole eighteen years ago—this remnant body is devoted to the very same mission, rooted in the very same purpose of defending the *original doctrines* that we believe came from Jesus Christ, revealed divinely and uniquely through the ministry of Mr. Herbert Armstrong in the twentieth century. Other groups and enterprises may choose to change their mission or their organizational focus in light of changing times and circumstances. We have not.

Some Changes Are Inevitable

What *has changed* is the make-up of new members who are now attracted to supporting this little remnant body. Unlike during the first ten to twenty years of our existence, new contacts today are not likely to be former members of the WCG who were baptized prior to 1975. There simply are not many from that particular generation still alive today (although a few still make contact from time to time). In the 1970s and '80s, this remnant group became a landing place for those who physically were forced out of the WCG, either directly or indirectly. The early literature produced by Church of God, The Eternal concerning the history of that time (still available at www.cogeternal.org) is addressed to an audience that is presumed to have witnessed and experienced *first-hand* much of the turmoil that resulted from major doctrinal changes in 1974.

Much later, after the 1990s break-up of the Worldwide Church of God—triggered by Mr. Armstrong's death in 1986—a whole new category of people began to flow in and to support this remnant. These were the ones who may have responded initially to God's calling years after 1974—who came to value the teachings of God's Master Plan as summarized in Mr. Armstrong's 1985 book, *Mystery of the Ages*—and who then endured the turmoil that ensued when the WCG rejected completely its spiritual foundation under the leadership of

new Protestant apologists. Many of these were not witnesses to the 1974 organizational upheavals, but they did endure a similar trauma during the final death throes of that corporate church two decades later. These are ones who came to connect their own experiences with those of an earlier generation and to conclude that the *real cause* of the 1990s implosion of the WCG was rooted in *the rejection of revealed Truth* "way before their time" in the 1970s.

What about today, in 2020? It is now becoming less common to receive new contacts who were even members of the WCG in the late 1980s or early 1990s (let alone the 1960s or '70s), given that it is already *twenty-five years* since that *second wave* of tumultuous events of the late twentieth century. Fewer and fewer witnesses of that time are left today, and to many it is all becoming very much "ancient history."

Is Church Interest Waning?

Does that mean that interest in the teachings of Hebert Armstrong is falling off? Not as far as we can tell. It just means that the number of *first-hand witnesses* to those twentieth-century events is receding, being replaced more and more with *new converts* who have found value in that Way of Life for their own personal reasons. Some of them may still have connections with that history, perhaps because they had one or both parents associated with the WCG for a certain period of time. As these younger individuals have begun to seek for deeper meaning in their own lives after experiencing the curses of the world, some have become attracted to some of the things their parents originally embraced, principles they learned through the WCG or else through one of the many splinter groups that came out of that parent church in the 1990s.

The fact is, the fundamental doctrines taught by Herbert Armstrong—differing so much from mainstream Christianity—still have power to attract and to convict hearts and minds. That is because there is inherent substance in those doctrines, no matter how they have been vilified in this evil world. There is no "religion" today that explains the real mysteries of the Bible better than what we received through Herbert Armstrong. That depth of understanding has never gone out of style.

Where Do We Go From Here?

With that in mind, what about the future for this little remnant body called Church of God, The Eternal? We know no more about what lies ahead than Raymond Cole knew in 1975 when he first registered the church with the State of Oregon. He had no idea what

would happen. Every major event that has transpired over the first forty-five years has been a surprise. Every event that is yet to transpire will likewise be a surprise. God has not chosen to lead us by giving us special prophetic insights. He has required us simply to defend the foundation of revealed Truth and then to trust Him to guide us through dangerous waters. That is how we have not only survived as an organized body but even continued to thrive to this day. We are still small in number and very vulnerable. That has always been true. But we have been incredibly resilient, thanks wholly to a divine Protector and Guide. As long as we retain the special favor of that Most High God, we need not be able to see the future. If we continue to proclaim boldly the revealed Truths of Jesus Christ—which so many others have abandoned—God will continue to be with us, and within the bonds of His loving care, what need have we to fear?

What About Our Work?

Raymond Cole never presumed the right to do a "Work" in the way that Mr. Armstrong did. He believed that it was Herbert Armstrong whom God had called to be *an apostle* in our time, meaning simply "one sent" by Jesus Christ to raise up His Church. Mr. Cole claimed no such mantle for himself nor presumed that he had the right to take it up. He was very leery of fulfilling the dubious prophecy concerning vain ministers in the last days who would "run" when they were not sent (Jeremiah 23:21). Raymond Cole had been ordained by Mr. Armstrong to *feed the sheep* who had been streaming into that parent church through the successful evangelism of *Mr. Armstrong himself*. Mr. Cole had never been used as an "evangelist"—in the sense of being a front-line spokesman in the Work—even though "Evangelist" was his corporate title within that parent organization. But even after Raymond Cole was forced out of the WCG, he did become comfortable in continuing the kind of "work" that he had always been assigned by Mr. Armstrong to do, to care for the flock. That is why he promised God that he would serve the ones that God particularly sent to him. That is what he did until his dying day. That is what we are still doing even until this day.

With that history in mind, do we have a particular "work" that we are part of today? It seems that as time goes by, we have been compelled more and more to remind people of what actually happened years ago. Facts of the past are easily lost unless there is a concerted effort to preserve that history. People forget, many pervert, and still others are only just now being exposed to that history for the first time. Besides our ongoing obligation to *feed the flock*, it seems that we have also been required, more and more, to recite evidence of *what actually happened* in our past, so that others may learn from it and hopefully avoid making the same kind of critical mistakes as have many before.

"Our take" on the history of Herbert Armstrong's life and work is summarized in the new book we published last year, entitled, *A Peculiar Treasure: The Enduring Legacy of Herbert & Loma Armstrong*. The purpose of that book project was not to be a *direct advertisement* for Church of God, The Eternal. No doubt the church is listed as the publisher, and the author is listed as the pastor of that church, but that is the only outward reference. It is not even an outward advertisement for Raymond Cole, except as his personal example under fire in the 1970s is a legitimate part of that history and was related as such.

Interestingly, one individual who ordered the book (a member of one of the other splinter groups) had this to say to the author after reading it: "Thank you for not finding yourself in the Bible." What did he mean by that? This of course is in contrast to the many other authors who seek to identify themselves as fulfilling specific *prophetic offices* in the Bible and using their books to make a *vanity pitch*. Often, by the last chapter of their books, they reveal "the real hook": an attempt to elevate themselves next to Mr. Armstrong. But unlike these other works that have been written about Mr. Armstrong—whose authors seek to link his Work to their own—we have tried to emphasize the value of Herbert Armstrong's work in the twentieth century *for its own sake as a divine operation*, so that new students might be able to digest that history and then perhaps come to value those basic Bible Truths which came through him—and him alone—in this age.

Do We Not Want to Grow?

Yes, no doubt we believe that ones who may yet come to see that history in context may someday also find a fraternal connection with us. We would love that to be true. We would love for God to send many more to fill the ranks of this little church. But that is God's business, and we are very willing to wait for Him to fulfill all of these prophecies of restitution according to His perfect Master Plan (John 10:16). In the meantime, our "Work" to produce material and to publish it is not because we have an expectation of growing by leaps and bounds. We have tried simply to write *an accurate history of events* and then let God use it in whatever way He might choose. After all, this is His Church and His Work. We trust Him to carry out His perfect will to gather lost sheep out of a spiritual wilderness before the return of Jesus Christ. He has promised to do so. We are certain that He will. We need not see ourselves as fulfilling particular roles in that last-day endeavor. Why not be satisfied with just proclaiming the revealed Truth as it was delivered to us, hold firm to it without compromise, and then let God take care of the rest? That is exactly the way Raymond Cole always looked at his role in leading this remnant flock, and that is exactly how we have continued to view our pastoral responsibilities since his death. There is no room for personal vanity. Such personalization is deadly, spiritually. If we are indeed a

faithful remnant, holding firm to God's Truth and finding grace and favor with Him, then it is because we are truly pointing God's children to Him for salvation, not to any man.

God's ministry is commanded to seek out the lost sheep (Ezekiel 34). Failing to do so is an abrogation of our ordained duties in Christ's service. Raymond Cole understood that, which is why he once said that even though we are not presuming to do "a Work" like Mr. Armstrong accomplished, we likewise are not trying to "hide in a cave." Hopefully, by publishing this new book last year, we are striking a proper balance to avoid presuming an apostolic Work, yet at the same time refusing to hide our candle under a bushel (Matthew 5:14–16).

What Is Your Role in the Future?

If you are one who recognizes those key lessons of church history—not only from the first century record but also from our own era of time over the past ninety years—then you have a special opportunity and a corresponding obligation. To whom much is given, of him is much required (Luke 12:48). You are ones who have been called by God, and that means you have been given the *privilege* of being enlightened out of the darkness of this evil world. God has given you a priceless gift, and that is the only reason you can understand the things that you do—things that your neighbors and unconverted family members consider to be foolishness. But those truths are a priceless treasure, and you have been charged with holding them dear and making that revealed Way of Life demonstrable in your own personal example. The obligation of every one of us, as called children, is to make the laws of God the foundation of our own behaviors, day by day. By *living* that Truth *in deed*, not just in word, we have an opportunity to be incredible witnesses in a very dark world. This is the sum total of God's requirement for us to gain salvation in His Kingdom. There is no greater "Work" that you and I have been called to fulfill (John 6:29; James 2:17–24).

No matter how few we may be at this present time, we should all be resolute, truly, to practice that kind of Christianity by the choices we make day in and day out. If we do, how might that example be used by God in the future? All too many seem to be waiting for a particular man to stand up and "do God's Work." What about all of us, together, doing the Work of God that has been set before us *right now*? The better example we all set in living that Way, the better able we will be to help others whom God may send in time.

A Note to Those of You on the Sidelines

There are many of God's called ones who have suffered from the effects of apostasy, even as God prophesied would occur in the last days (Jeremiah 23). Sadly, much of that

suffering has come at the hands of ministers who did not show *real love* for the people of God or execute their offices with any level of *real wisdom*. The *fruit of their labours* is the catastrophic scattering that exists today. Beyond the relative few who are affiliated with one of the organized remnant groups that came out of the Worldwide Church of God, there are a whole host of God's people who are hiding in the shadows. Why? They still have a sincere love for the things they learned through the church which makes the Bible come alive, but they have been traumatized by the misdeeds of men, and therefore "keep their distance" from any organized group. They sample writings and sermons from afar, but they are reticent to get too close, lest they experience a repeat of the traumas of times past.

If you are one who may fall into this category, it is not your fault. This is exactly what God said would occur within His true church, and we are living the fruits of it today. There is a serious price to be paid one day by faithless ministers who have abused God's precious children. At the same time, Jesus Christ did promise that the gates of hell would never prevail against His Church, and that there would indeed be a faithful remnant continuing until the very end, even in the midst of so much darkness and confusion.

Besides the members of this little remnant body who attend Sabbaths and Holy Days and who are overt participants, there are also many others who contribute to this church in a secondary fashion. Their contributions in tithes and offerings are significant, and they are ones who surface from time to time to express appreciation for the sermons and letters that we produce. But they are ones who have resisted "getting too close," because of troubling personal and church history.

If you have done your best to avoid violating the Sabbaths, and if you have continued to try to keep the Law as we were taught through Mr. Armstrong, good for you. But is there more that God may be wanting from you now? We are each required to love one another. That does not just mean being nice to people you bump into along the way. Jesus used *His own example* as a standard for what He meant:

A new commandment I give unto you, That ye love one another; *as I have loved you*, that ye also love one another. By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another (John 13:34–35) [emphasis mine].

To whom was He speaking? Those specially called out of this world—His disciples! And the proof of His Work in this world was going to be that kind of love *manifested within the congregation of those true believers*, among disciples.

If we are each commanded to love one another, how can we do that from the sidelines? How can we do that by sitting at home and just partaking of church literature from

afar? This is not just an attempt to bring you *under the thumb* of this ministry. God forbid! Yes, if you are working to apply principles of self-control in your daily life, if you are tithing as God requires, and if you are praying and studying, that is significant. But if you are failing to convoke with others of like mind when it is possible for you to do so, you are still not obeying fully. God's Sabbaths are holy *convocations*. You cannot convoke with yourself, only with others. And you cannot fully "love the brethren" if you are not "with the brethren."

It is a scary thing to consider "taking the leap" to come into closer personal contact with a church. That is totally understandable. But real Christianity requires courage, manifesting the *faith* to trust that God is going to take care of you. Many of you have been "beaten up" in the past. We get that. But that was never the way Raymond Cole ever dealt with God's people, and that is likewise not the way this ministry treats the children of God today. Many who have been tentative, but who have taken that leap to get to know us have come to find that being an active participant in Church of God, The Eternal really is different than being in these other groups. If you ever become willing to try it, you will have a chance to meet many of those who have experienced traumas similar to yours, but who have come to find a real home within this little fellowship. Whether close at hand or at a distance, you are beloved in the eyes of God, and therefore beloved to this ministry as well. If you become ready to take that next step, we are ready to welcome you with sincere love, respect, and with personal regard.

Final Observations

As we stop to think about the history of Church of God, The Eternal and all that has been part of our forty-five year journey since February 1975, we are indeed part of something unique and quite special. Even though we stand for the preservation of doctrines that Herbert Armstrong himself espoused for forty years as the revelation of Jesus Christ—like a Monday Pentecost and the sanctity of marriages both in and out of the church—by holding onto those very beliefs we have been vilified by most of those ministers who eventually came out of that same parent church. They claim that we are disrespectful to Mr. Armstrong because we do not believe that any man—even a true apostle of God—has the authority to change doctrine. Especially because of our defense of *bound marriages for life*, there are many who resist joining our fellowship, because all too many of them are involved in second or third marriages. Accepting the original teaching of Mr. Armstrong would require a monumental cost—to admit that they are committing adultery and then to stop it. For that reason, if nothing else, it is very likely that we will continue to be a *very small* remnant group, not one of the larger ones.

And yet, look at all of the more liberal splinter groups that have come and gone over the past forty years—many of which had every reason to be more attractive than we are. Yet

hundreds of them have disappeared, and we are still here, more stable and vibrant than at any time in our history. Again, we believe that is due entirely to God's special help and favor. It is certainly not due to the greater human abilities of either Raymond Cole or this current human ministry.

The lesson: Forget trying to manage God's church by pandering to the most popular teachings of human beings, according to carnal lusts and covetousness. Stand fearlessly by the teachings that were *inspired directly by Jesus Christ* through His chosen servant—no matter how unpopular they might be to the masses—and then let God be the One who fights to preserve it miraculously.

Marriage is honourable in all, and the bed undefiled: but whoremongers and adulterers God will judge. Let your [conduct] be without covetousness; and be content with such things as ye have: for he hath said, I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee. So that we may boldly say, The Lord is my helper, and I will not fear what man shall do unto me (Hebrews 13:4–6).

This is exactly what Raymond Cole did in 1974 which led to his ouster from the Worldwide Church of God. He believed sincerely that God had raised up that true Church under Herbert Armstrong. He also believed that what happened to undermine fundamental doctrines while Mr. Armstrong was still alive was also prophesied in the Bible as a test for all of us. How many of us came to believe that it was the *Church of God*—established and preserved by Jesus Christ upon the *precepts of revealed Truth*—vs. those who attributed those early doctrines to the wisdom (or errors) of men?

All of these years hence, we are still proclaiming that it was *the Church of God*, not the church of any man. God helping us, we will continue to be blessed with the opportunity to shine that bright light into the darkness that has not only engulfed the world, but yet engulfs many of God's wayward children at large. We pray for the day when God will set His hand to show it to them dramatically. He will do it. And in the meantime, we will patiently persist in proclaiming that Truth, and in reminding them of our history.

Yours with sincere devotion in Christ Jesus,

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

Jon W. Brisby