

God's Peculiar Treasure

February 2010

Dear Brethren:

To evaluate the potential legitimacy of Mr. Herbert Armstrong's work—or that of any other man or organization claiming God's inspiration—we first have to have a benchmark for comparison. How can one hope to "prove the truth" if he is not really sure what he is looking for? Should he simply employ the proverbial "elephant test"—searching haphazardly for something which is hard to describe in advance, but is hoped to be instantly recognizable when spotted? Or is there perhaps a better strategy to identify the true work of God?

If we trust that the Bible is the inspired word of God, perhaps He has provided some hints to show us what a legitimate work in His name should actually look like. Perhaps He has also recorded information to tell us what befalls His work among men, both historically and prophetically. If so, it may not require such a blind stab in the dark after all to assess objectively whether the empire built under Herbert Armstrong might possibly have had any divine inspiration—or not.

A Time Order for Salvation

One of the most distinctive hallmarks of the true Church of God is acknowledgment that God is not trying *presently* to save the whole world. Oh yes, it is His ultimate intent to bring salvation to the world (1 Timothy 2:3–4; 1 John 2:2). But what most self-proclaimed Christians do not understand is that there is a specific *time order* being implemented by God, and that only very few human beings today are being offered a close personal relationship with Him *for the moment*. The Bible is replete with confirmations of this fact, yet so few recognize that simple truth:

For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive. But every man *in his own order*: Christ the firstfruits; afterward they that are Christ's at his coming (1 Corinthians 15:22–23) [emphasis mine throughout].

. . . and they lived and reigned with Christ a thousand years. But the rest of the dead lived not again until the thousand years were finished (Revelation 20:4–5).

No man can come to me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him (John 6:44).

Of his own will begat he us with the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures (James 1:18).

The symbolism of firstfruits—differentiating an early harvest from a latter harvest—permeates the Bible as a hallmark of God's work with man. The majority of those in this world claiming to be Christians share the false belief that anyone who *chooses* can "come to Christ" at any time. They do not account *seriously* in their theology any relevance to early and late harvests. In fact, they believe all men alive today are being offered salvation *right now*, and that anyone who does not accept that calling before he dies is doomed. That is why so many religious groups expend enormous energies and resources sending missionaries to all parts of the globe. They are trying to "save" as many as they possibly can before it is too late for them. To them, the worst possible end is for anyone to die having never said the magic words, "I accept Jesus Christ as my personal Savior." Couple this with their false notions about the afterlife—believing that the "unsaved" will live forever in the torment of hell fire, suffering in excruciating misery—and you have the answer for how Satan has deceived the whole world (Revelation 12:9).

All of these ideas are completely bogus and totally unscriptural, for anyone who cares to examine it honestly. The Bible is very plain that God did not choose to make salvation open to every human being at any and every given time. God determines the specific time of each one's privileged call, and until that time, no one can force Jesus Christ to receive him. This truth is hated by the majority of those claiming to be Christians in this world, but it is fact nonetheless. It is one of the truths which makes Christian imposters hate the true people of God so much. The world has been blinded by Satan to believe that everyone should have an *equal opportunity* at salvation *on their own terms*, and anyone who advocates otherwise is called discriminatory, hateful, racist, and even dangerous to society. But whether well-meaning "Christian" activists want to admit it or not, Jesus Christ has always shown *partiality* in His work among men. The very role of Israel in this great master plan for human salvation is the proof of that.

God's Peculiar Treasure

Understanding the real work of God begins with understanding the role of Israel. Those who ignore the Israel of God preclude themselves from ever understanding the plan being unfolded step by step to bring salvation to this world. God made Israel special.

Now therefore, if ye will obey my voice indeed, and keep my covenant, then ye shall be *a peculiar treasure* unto me above all people: for all the earth is

mine: And ye shall be unto me a kingdom of priests, and an holy nation. These are the words which thou shalt speak unto the children of Israel (Exodus 19:5–6).

Yes, like it or not, God showed explicit partiality to one little group of people out of all who lived on the face of the earth. He did not treat all men "equally," as political correctness in today's world demands. God loves all men *equally*, and they are *all* special in His glorious master plan of love, but that plan is being unfolded step by step according to *His* specifications, not theirs.

For the LORD hath chosen Jacob unto himself, and Israel for his *peculiar treasure*. For I know that the LORD is great, and that our Lord is above all gods. Whatsoever the LORD pleased, that did he in heaven, and in earth, in the seas, and all deep places (Psalms 135:4–6).

So God refers to Israel as His *peculiar treasure*. As we shall see, this does not refer merely to those physical descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob historically. Ancient Israel was the *type*—the physical forerunner—an instructive symbol. But the New Testament Church is the *anti-type*—the *spiritual counterpart* and true fulfillment of all which God is doing to bring salvation to mankind (Galatians 6:15–16). Jesus Christ confirmed that salvation is of the Jews (John 4:22). That is indisputable. But He also revealed through the Apostle Paul that a *real Jew* is not just one who has a physical pedigree, but one who is *converted* through *circumcision of the heart* (Romans 2:28–29). Those who are called by God—regardless of race or national heritage—and who accept that calling through baptism and begetting of the Holy Spirit, become spiritual Israelites. The true Church of God—wherever it may be found—is *spiritual Jerusalem*, the mother of us all (Galatians 4:26), and the wife whom Jesus Christ will marry at His Second Coming (Revelation 19:7). The New Testament Church, composed of physical members *of all peoples* according to His pleasure, becomes—through the miracle of spiritual conversion—the true Israel, God's peculiar treasure.

For the grace of God that bringeth salvation hath appeared to all men, Teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly, in this present world; Looking for that blessed hope, and the glorious appearing of the great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ; Who gave himself for us, that he might redeem us from all iniquity, and purify unto himself *a peculiar people*, zealous of good works (Titus 2:11–14).

Given that very brief synopsis of God's plan, what can we discover about the true Church of God from all that God has recorded in the Bible? Remember, we are trying to identify *distinguishing characteristics* of that Church—God's peculiar treasure—which will allow us to test the legitimacy of any modern group claiming to be part of it.

Why Peculiar?

Why did God call His chosen people peculiar? The Hebrew word is *cegullah*. It means a valued property, a possession which is distinctively special. It does not denote something that is common or run-of-the-mill. Solomon's use of the word in Ecclesiastes, chapter two—describing his search for gratification through the acquisition of unique and precious possessions—provides context:

. . . also I had great possessions of great and small cattle above all that were in Jerusalem before me: I gathered me also silver and gold, and *the peculiar treasure of kings* and of the provinces . . . So I was great, and increased more than all that were before me in Jerusalem (Ecclesiastes 2:7–9).

When human kings become great and marvelously wealthy, they often seek to acquire precious things which are uniquely valuable and awe-inspiring, therewith enhancing their own personal prestige and legacy. Solomon was one such king. Another example familiar to most of us is the Egyptian pharaoh, Tutankhamun, whose vast burial treasures on display worldwide today include incredible jewelry, ornaments, statues, and sculptures. Millions around the world have paid to see the traveling exhibits of this ancient pharaoh's own *peculiar treasures*. Solomon's reference to the *peculiar treasure of kings* uses the very same Hebrew word, *cegullah*, which God uses to describe His own chosen people.

This should help confirm that those who are offered a close, personal relationship with God are not *many*, are not *common*, and are certainly not *unremarkable*. They are *rare* within the population of human beings, they are *unique* in characteristics, and they are *curiously valuable* to God in this world. This very depiction of Israel by God Himself totally undermines the false "salvation-path doctrines" espoused by the majority today. Any group which claims God is not using a *preferential order* in offering salvation to mankind is denying the clear evidence of the Bible.

For thou art an holy people unto the LORD thy God: the LORD thy God hath chosen thee to be a special [*cegullah*] people unto himself, above all people that are upon the face of the earth (Deuteronomy 7:6).

Hateful Discrimination?

Is not this doctrine just another attempt to twist the Scripture to justify divisive, arrogant partiality to glorify a very few today at the expense of the many? After all, many hate-filled religious groups have claimed to be "Israel" in order to justify very un-Christian behaviors, disdainfully treating anyone who they consider to be "Gentile" with gross disrespect, and even violence!

Anyone can pick up a Bible and read that Israel was the special treasure of God, then coopt that title for selfish reasons and commit all manner of atrocities "in the name of God." Men have been doing that for thousands of years. Satan encourages such abuse as a means to further disparage the truth of God's master plan on this earth. But the misdeeds of deceived men will never negate the validity of God's work. But how can you tell the difference? Many claim to be the Israel of God (Galatians 6:16). What are the true Church's distinguishing fruits from all of these many imposters?

Another identifying mark of the true Church of God is understanding that they have never *earned* their special favor with God. There is no arrogance involved! They acknowledge that they were most unworthy among all human beings on earth, and that they now enjoy this special relationship with God only because of His mercy and inexplicable benevolence. Again, God's explanation—in His own Words—reveals much:

The LORD did not set his love upon you, nor choose you, because ye were more in number than any people; for ye were the fewest of all people: But because the LORD loved you, and because he would keep the oath which he had sworn unto your fathers, hath the LORD brought you out with a mighty hand, and redeemed you out of the house of bondmen, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt (Deuteronomy 7:7–8).

There is no inherent honor in being born an Israelite. The history of the acts of ancient Israel is a testament to that fact. Israel had no qualities that made them better than any other peoples. They never *earned* God's special favor in any way. Furthermore, since they never obeyed God for any length of time, their recorded history is one of national failure. Israel became a reproach because of her stiff-necked arrogance, unchecked personal weakness, and refusal to do things God's way. Anyone who decides to attach himself to Israel as a means to make himself seem "better" should study the abject failure of those very people. Jesus Christ Himself said that taking pride in being an Israelite of the flesh is worthless. In speaking to bonafide—pedigreed—Israelites, He said:

. . . If ye were Abraham's children, ye would do the works of Abraham Ye are of your father the devil, and the lusts of your father ye will do. He was a murderer from the beginning, and abode not in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he speaketh a lie, he speaketh of his own: for he is a liar, and the father of it. And because I tell you the truth, ye believe me not. Which of you convinceth me of sin? And if I say the truth, why do ye not believe me? He that is of God heareth God's words: ye therefore hear them not, because ye are not of God (John 8:39, 44–47).

So being a physical Israelite profits nothing if there is not actual *behavior*—personal fruits—which pleases God. Even as ancient Israel was not picked by God for special favor

because of anything they ever did to deserve it, so is the same true with those who have been offered special favor to be called to become part of the New Testament Church—spiritual Israel.

For ye see your calling, brethren, how that not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called: But God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty; And base things of the world, and things which are despised, hath God chosen, yea, and things which are not, to bring to nought things that are (1 Corinthians 1:26–28).

If you are one who has been called by God—given an open mind to receive an understanding and appreciation of the real Truth—then you have no cause to gloat. That calling had nothing to do with your inherent worthiness. Much to the contrary, it probably indicates you are one who is *least likely* to be appreciated in this world, according to man's standards. Why would God choose to call primarily the weak and the base?

That no flesh should glory in his presence. But of him are ye in Christ Jesus, who of God is made unto us wisdom, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption: That, according as it is written, He that glorieth, *let him glory in the Lord* (verses 29–31).

So now it becomes plain! When people who—by nature—are the off-scouring of the world are given a special calling, and by the power of God's Holy Spirit learn to manifest good fruits which were previously beyond their reach, it is *God* who will get the credit—the glory—for their changed lives, *not the individuals themselves*. Amazing. If it were otherwise, and God chose to call the most respected and revered individuals on earth "naturally," their successes in Christ would easily become attributable to their own inherent abilities. God would receive little if any of the credit, and our masterful Creator is too wise to design His plan in a way which would foster such a false impression.

The true Church of God does not vilify the uncalled masses of the world. They resist becoming part of the world and its evils, but they recognize that all of these people are likewise beloved children of God, and in His appropriate time, all of them will likewise receive their opportunity to know God. Salvation is only through Israel, but all of those children—some sooner, some later—will receive their chance to become spiritual Israelites through the gift of the Holy Spirit. "It is the spirit that quickeneth; the flesh profiteth nothing" (John 6:63). Therefore, anyone who professes to be of Israel, but shows institutional disdain and hatred toward other peoples—whether in or out of the church—is an imposter. That will never be a trait of the true Israel of God.

Respect for God's Law

What else has God recorded in His Bible to help us identify unique traits of the true Church—God's peculiar treasure? Wherever they exist, they show sincere respect for the commandments of God.

Look down from thy holy habitation, from heaven, and bless thy people Israel . . . This day the LORD thy God hath commanded thee to do these statutes and judgments: *thou shalt therefore keep and do them with all thine heart, and with all thy soul.* Thou hast avouched the LORD this day to be thy God, and *to walk in his ways, and to keep his statutes, and his commandments, and his judgments,* and to hearken unto his voice: And the LORD hath avouched thee this day to be *his peculiar people,* as he hath promised thee, and that thou shouldest keep all his commandments; And to make thee high above all nations which he hath made, in praise, and in name, and in honour; and that thou mayest be an holy people unto the LORD thy God, as he hath spoken (Deuteronomy 26:15–19).

Lest anyone believe this was merely a requirement for ancient Israel but not for spiritual Israel—the Church—let Jesus Christ resolve that with His own words:

If ye love me, keep my commandments He that hath my commandments, and keepeth them, he it is that loveth me: and he that loveth me shall be loved of my Father, and I will love him, and will manifest myself to him If a man love me, he will keep my words: and my Father will love him, and we will come unto him, and make our abode with him. He that loveth me not keepeth not my sayings: and the word which ye hear is not mine, but the Father's which sent me (John 14:15, 21–24).

This is the very same standard required of ancient Israel. The commandments confirmed by Jesus Christ were the very same ones established by God *from the beginning,* and later codified on two tablets of stone for Israel at Mt. Sinai.

Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil [fill full, magnify]. For verily I say unto you, Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled. Whosoever therefore shall break one of these least commandments, and shall teach men so, he shall be called the least in the kingdom of heaven: but whosoever shall do and teach them, the same shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 5:17–19).

Jesus Christ never did away with those commandments, but in fact *magnified them* and made their spiritual application even more far-reaching than ever before (Matthew 5:21–28). Therefore, anyone claiming that God's commandments are not incumbent upon Christians today is demonstrating that he is an imposter.

And hereby we do know that we know him, if we keep his commandments. He that saith, I know him, and keepeth not his commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him. But whoso keepeth his word, in him verily is the love of God perfected: hereby know we that we are in him. He that saith he abideth in him ought himself also so to walk, even as he walked (1 John 2:3–6).

Jesus Christ set a perfect example by keeping the Ten Commandments. Those claiming that Christ kept them perfectly so that we do not have to, are only espousing exactly what the Apostle John said would identify these imposters.

The Sabbath—a Sign

This includes belief and practice of the fourth commandment—keeping the Sabbath. Many will acknowledge the need to avoid murder, theft, and adultery, but for some reason, keeping God's Sabbath is a huge obstacle. Is that not why God said that the Sabbath(s) would become *the sign* between Him and His true people?

Speak thou also unto the children of Israel, saying, Verily my sabbaths ye shall keep: for it is a sign between me and you throughout your generations; that ye may know that I am the LORD that doth sanctify you (Exodus 31:13).

Moreover also I gave them my sabbaths, to be a sign between me and them, that they might know that I am the LORD that sanctify them (Ezekiel 20:12).

Jesus Christ never did away with the Sabbath, any more than He did away with the laws against murder, theft, and adultery. And therefore, one of the key indicators to help narrow our search for the true Church of God today is a respect for keeping His commanded Sabbaths. Any group who repudiates those Sabbaths is automatically disqualified. That single criteria will cull the vast majority of so-called "Christian fellowships" in one fell swoop. It still leaves a number of competing groups today who *do* claim the Sabbath, but it sure helps narrow the field. Sabbath-keeping is certainly a major factor in making the true Church stand out as "peculiar" in this world.

For thou art an holy people unto the LORD thy God, and the LORD hath chosen thee to be a peculiar people unto himself, above all the nations that are upon the earth (Deuteronomy 14:2).

In Summary Thus Far

We began by asking how we might verify the potential legitimacy of that significant and intriguing religious movement begun under Mr. Herbert Armstrong in the twentieth century. Before attempting to make that assessment, we first have to have a standard—a benchmark—by which to measure. Recognizing the key criteria for any legitimate work of God *according to God's own definitions* is the first step. What do we know so far?

Wherever a true work of God is found, it is a body which acknowledges that:

- 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.

These are the important first criteria—straight from the Bible—which form a key part of our benchmark for testing the religious works of men.

Before applying this yardstick specifically to the work of Herbert Armstrong, are there other elements which can yet be added to strengthen our differential analysis? Yes indeed. In an upcoming issue, we will look at the *historical behaviors* of Israel—God's peculiar treasure—as well as the *prophesied behaviors* of spiritual Israel in the last days. Given what God recorded that ancient Israel actually did, and what spiritual Israel of the first century actually did, are we provided any hints to show what would befall the true Church of God in our very own time? Those words were recorded so that the called of God would have a definite basis for comparison.

. . . and a book of remembrance was written before him for them that feared the LORD, and that thought upon his name. And they shall be mine, saith the LORD of hosts, in that day when I make up my jewels [*cegullah*]; and I will spare them, as a man spareth his own son that serveth him. Then shall ye return, *and discern between the righteous and the wicked*, between him that serveth God and him that serveth him not (Malachi 3:16–18).

Adding this historical dimension will give us much to compare as we dissect the history of the Worldwide Church of God under Herbert Armstrong.

May God continue to preserve each and every one of you as a beloved part of His very peculiar treasure.

In loving devotion through Jesus Christ,

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

Jon W. Brisby