

WHAT DO CHURCHGOERS BELIEVE? AND WHY?

by Herbert W. Armstrong

A large segment of American life attends church on Sunday mornings.

WHY do they go? WHAT do these churchgoers BELIEVE, and WHY? The plain truth is a little shocking—and illuminating!

NOTHING is so astonishing as the truth! It is often stranger than fiction.

Most people who attend church regularly, or even occasionally, would be really surprised if they should probe into their own minds far enough to ask WHY they go, and just WHAT is their religious belief—and WHY?

Do You KNOW?

As a baby, I was taken to church. As a child, I was taken to Sunday school and church. It was a Quaker church. I attended church until I was 18. Then I began attending the theater, the athletic contests or dances. When we were married, my wife and I felt we ought to attend church. We looked over the churches in the general area of our home, selected one that was convenient, respectable, with a modern building, a friendly and personable pastor, and members we liked socially.

But WHY did we join? WHY did we attend church?

Well, we just felt we ought to—that's about all. Did we stop to analyze *why* we ought to attend church? Well, no. We supposed all people *should* attend church, should they not? We probably didn't think much about *why!* But hasn't everybody always *heard* that one should go to church? It seems we had.

Most people simply assume, take for granted and accept without question what they've always heard. Usually they don't know WHY.

What Did We Believe?

Did we have a definite religion? Reflecting back, my answer would have to be "No." How about you?

What did we believe? Well, we had no deep-rooted convictions. We believed, of course, those things we had most often *heard* in church. We supposed there is a heaven and hell—an ever-burning hell. We believed—or supposed we did—in the immortality of the soul. We believed in Sunday, and Christmas and New Year's and Easter, and from boyhood I had heard the pastor talk about a few weird things, or names, or something that had abso-

lutely no meaning to me—"Pentecost," "grace," "Antioch," "sanctification," "justification," "dead in trespasses and sins." Of course I knew all those things came out of the Bible—but then, I always said, "I just can't understand the Bible."

And, speaking of the Bible, what *does* the average churchgoer think about the Bible? I think that in those years I was typical of many. It was "the *Good Book*." I did, in a way, regard it with a certain superstitious awe. It was beyond my comprehension. Of course I assumed our church got its beliefs out of the Bible. The preacher could understand it. But then, too, I grew up looking on the minister as a person *different* from the rest of us. He was a sort of holy man, not tempted to sin or to enjoy the worldly pleasures like the rest of us. He was like a man from another world. But the Bible was the Book men laid their hands on when taking the oath of office. And it was the one Book I should have been too embarrassed to carry down the street.

Did I look on it as "the Word of God"? Well, yes, I suppose so. But then I never thought of it in *specific* terms as the message, the

instruction of God, to give man the explanation of what he is, and why he is here, and where he is going, and how he ought to live, and how he can be happy, and prosperous and enjoy life more.

Somehow "religion" was for Sunday morning—except that I had been taught that its prohibitions lasted all day Sunday. It was sin to go to the theater on Sunday, and it was a sin to dance, or smoke, or swear, or drink at any time—and even theatergoing was "worldly" and probably a sin at any time. Playing cards was sin too. Aside from a few such things, I had no idea what my church *believed*.

Except for a few such church teachings, "religion" was for Sunday morning and had no connection whatever with my life otherwise. Of course church membership often supplies a portion of one's social life, and many men attend to make valuable business contacts.

Religion? Well, vaguely I had heard that Adam was the first man, and that he sinned, and "fell"—whatever that meant. As a result I vaguely conceived that life was like a one-way trip on a train. Because of Adam, the switch in the track at the end of the line is thrown to shoot us all down to hell. So I supposed we needed to "get saved," although I had been taught that I had a "birthright membership" in the church, so I guessed I probably was already "saved"—at least I don't remember that I ever worried about it. When one is "saved," the switch in the track at the end of life's journey is then thrown so that, when he gets to the end of the line he will be shot instantly up to heaven, "to be with the Lord" in mansions above, "over the river," or "on the other shore," wherever

all that was. Anyway, it was "up yonder" and when they called the roll, I took it for granted I was going to be there.

And what was my idea of GOD—and of Christ—and of the devil? Well, God was One to fear and be appeased, in a way—and yet, if we pleased Him, He could make things break our way for us. If we faced a frightful tragedy and possible death, crying out to Him might save us. But generally, I think I rather took it for granted that God didn't want us to be happy or enjoy

had no relation to or connection with the rest of life as a whole—my school, fun, play, hobbies, and, as I grew older, business, philosophies and beliefs.

What a "Bible Christian" Is Like

But when I was 34 years of age, my religious nonchalance was rudely jolted. My wife and I were visiting my parents in Salem, Oregon. Mrs. Armstrong returned from a visit with one of my mother's friends—a neighbor. This woman seemed to be a sort of "Bible Christian." She had handed her Bible to my wife and asked her to read a certain passage aloud. Then, without any comment whatever, she asked my wife to turn to another passage and read it aloud—then another and another. All these passages seemed to connect in an orderly sequence.

"Why!" exclaimed my wife in astonishment, "this is not what I've always been taught! Have I always been led to believe *just the opposite* of what the Bible teaches?"

"Well, don't ask me," smiled my mother's neighbor. "I didn't teach you a word. You just read it yourself out of the



"I vaguely conceived that life was like a one-way trip on a train. Because of Adam, the switch in the track at the end of the line is thrown to shoot us all down to hell. So I supposed we needed to 'get saved' . . ."

life—He certainly frowned on all worldly pleasures. Christ, however, was more kind and loving—He was our Savior. Above all, neither God nor Christ were *REAL* to me—they were in reality "far off."

Now these were not definite, concrete beliefs or deep-rooted convictions. They were just ethereal, vague assumptions. I never gave them deep or specific thought. I just took them for granted, supposing everybody believed these things. My mind was focused on the material interests of the moment—things closer to hand. As I said, religion was for Sunday. It

Bible."

Mrs. Armstrong came running to tell me what she had discovered. Suddenly her religious belief had been changed. To me, she had become a religious fanatic. What she had read out of the Bible was diametrically contrary to the general teachings of the churches. I was angered, furious. Argument did no good. She had all the answers—and right out of the Bible. This was the incident that challenged and angered me into the first real study of the Bible of all my life.

I said: "You can't tell me that all these churches are wrong. I know

they get what they believe out of the Bible!" So I devoted six months to intensive, almost night and day, research and study to try to find, *in the Bible*, what I had been taught in church. I, too, was astounded to find just the opposite. I obtained the literature of churches supporting their beliefs. I searched the commentaries, the lexicons, the Bible encyclopedias. I searched out the arguments of higher criticism on these points. I tried my best to overthrow my wife's new Bible beliefs—but they definitely were in the Bible.

I entered an in-depth research of the theory of evolution. I studied Lamarck, Darwin, Haeckel, Huxley, Spencer, Vogt. I almost doubted the existence of God, researched science and philosophy, and PROVED irrefutably that the all-intelligent personal Creator God does exist. Then I put the Bible to test—and by several infallible proofs, PROVED it to be the very revelation of the living God to mankind, carrying final AUTHORITY.

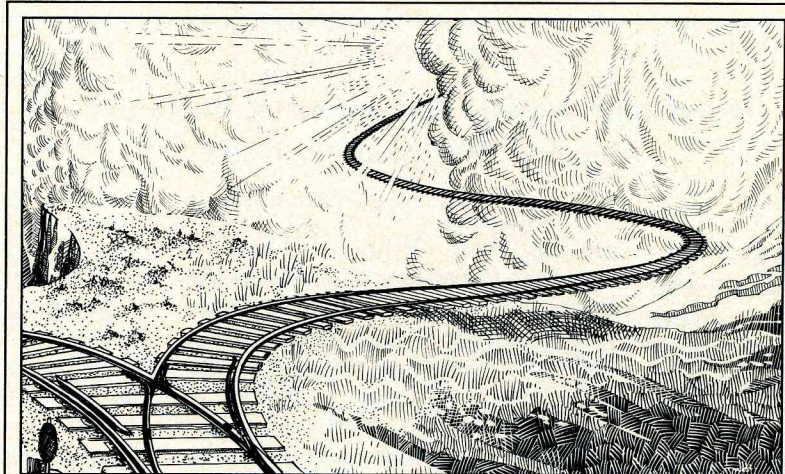
Now I was no longer carelessly assuming or taking for granted without question what I had heard or what others accepted. I was *proving* what was true. And it was *not* what I *wanted* to accept. Rather, it wounded my pride. It was humiliating. It was traumatic. It brought me to the most difficult decision of my life—to admit not only that I had been wrong—but to see my own self, for the first time, as I really *was*—an abhorrent, rebellious, vain human who was evil by nature and unworthy of God's grace and mercy and love.

It was a bitter decision—I now felt my life was worthless, but I told God that if He could use such a worthless life, I would give it to Him in unconditional surrender.

At last, once I swallowed my pride, admitted defeat, was humbled, had repented, and accepted the Christ of the Bible—a different Christ than I had previously pictured—I had found the true SOURCE for belief.

What a difference there is between professed "Christians" who are churchgoers, and a true BIBLE Christian! I *know* that difference because I have been both!

Regardless of whether one has been *angered* into an honest study of the Bible, as I was, or whether



Illustrations by Monte Wolverton

“... When one is ‘saved,’ the switch in the track at the end of life’s journey is then thrown so that, when he gets to the end of the line he will be shot instantly up to heaven, ‘to be with the Lord.’ ”

he had never been to church or heard anything else in the first place, or WHY he looks into the Bible for himself, he will find the same thing there that I found—if he is honest and willing.

A person who is born and reared on a faraway uninhabited island in mid-ocean, having never heard *any* religious belief, if he had a Bible and was able to read, would be a total stranger to many of these things I was taught in church—he would see, in the Bible, just what everybody else does who looks into it *honestly*.

What’s wrong, then? When

today’s “enlightened” clergy, and its theological seminaries where young ministers are educated, spend more time trying to determine how much of the Bible they wish to classify as myth, and how little as truth—when only 1 percent of theological students in the U.S., by actual survey, believe in any Second Coming of Christ which is stated and affirmed repeatedly in the Bible—when theologians and the professional clergy interpret the Bible to mean the very opposite of what it plainly says, in order to pretend that it supports their teachings—then you may *know* what is wrong.

If you will read Jeremiah 23, Ezekiel 13, and 34, which are prophecies of conditions *now*, in our day, and of Christ’s statement of Matthew 24:4-5, 11, 24, of the false preachers that would deceive the MANY; and of the many statements in the Bible that the whole world would be deceived, you will begin to understand. It is, indeed, hard for one born, reared, and steeped in this world’s education, religion, customs and ways, to realize that this is *not* God’s world, but Satan’s.

It comes as a jarring

shock! I know. I’ve experienced it!

The Bible interprets itself. It means what it says, and it says what it means. Taken as it *is*, it *makes sense*.

Don’t be a spiritual coward. Look into it *for yourself*. It’s full of surprises—it’s full of TRUTH—it’s full of the way to a positive peace of mind, to happiness, to prosperity, abundant living here and now and to salvation in joyous eternal life—FOREVER!

God’s world is soon coming—the peaceful, happy WORLD TOMORROW! □