History of the Church of God Series

The Concept of "the Work" in the Bible

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Version 1.0

Introduction

The reason for writing this article is three-fold:

1. to explore the much often used term in the Worldwide Church of God "The Work;" and
2. if and how the term was used prior to the old Worldwide Church of God and Herbert W Armstrong; and
3. to demonstrate that those who espouse the view that the term *only* refers God develop His character in Christian are mistaken.

A bit of background: in the mid-1970s I noticed how the Church used the term "Work" to refer to the activities of the Church involved with outreach or evangelistic efforts. As always, I attempted to find some Scriptural usage or terminology that fitted this use and indeed, there was as we shall find below.

So, given my interest in tracing how the Churches of God have used and developed terminology such as "the Work," I have accumulated notes and ideas on this for decades. This article represents another item in the *History of the Church of God series* in an attempt to capture the many aspects of its history that have been overlooked or forgotten over time.

We will explore this subject methodically by examining what the Scriptures themselves tell us and following this up with the usage within the Churches of God.

NB: ESV used throughout this study.

1.0 Old Testament Usage

A search through the Old Testament reveals that the term and concept is found throughout and this informs us of how and why it was used in the 19th-21st century Church of God.

1. Numbers (Levitical Priesthood):

Numbers 4:23

"From thirty years old up to fifty years old, you shall list them, all who can come **to do duty, to do service** in the tent of meeting."

"Do duty / do service" (= "work" in KJV and other versions) describes the labour of the Gershonite Levites in transporting and caring for the Tabernacle.

Numbers 8:24

"This applies to the Levites: from twenty-five years old and upward they shall come to **do duty** in the service of the tent of meeting."

Explanation as above.

2. 1 & 2 Chronicles (preparation and building of Solomon's Temple):

1 Chronicles 9:33 (ESV)
"Now these, the singers, the heads of fathers' houses of the Levites, were in the chambers of the temple free from other service, for they were on duty day and night." (KJV = "employed in that work")
While the ESV uses "on duty," the idea points to the ongoing service of the Temple singers. Their work of praise was considered a ministry or "work" within the house of God.
1 Chronicles 28:20–21
"Then David said to Solomon his son, 'Be strong and courageous and do it. Do not be afraid and do not be dismayed, for the Lord God, even my God, is with you. He will not leave you or forsake you, until all **the work** for the service of the house of the Lord is finished. And behold the divisions of the priests and the Levites for all the service of the house of God; and with you in all the work will be every willing man who has skill for any kind of service; also the officers and all the people will be wholly at your command.'"
"The work" above apparently includes both the construction of the Temple and the organised service within it.
1 Chronicles 29:1
"And David the king said to all the assembly, 'Solomon my son, whom alone God has chosen, is young and inexperienced, and **the work** is great, for the palace will not be for man but for the Lord God.'"
"The work" refers to the immense task of building the Temple (called a "palace" for God).
2 Chronicles 5:1
"Thus all **the work** that Solomon did for the house of the Lord was finished. And Solomon brought in the things that David his father had dedicated, and stored the silver, the gold, and all the vessels in the treasuries of the house of God."
"All the work" denotes the completed construction and furnishing of the Temple. The verse marks the successful end of the building project begun under David's preparations.

3. Ezra (post-exilic Temple rebuilding):
Ezra 3:8
"Now in the second year after their coming to the house of God at Jerusalem, in the second month, Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel and Jeshua the son of Jozadak made a beginning, together with the rest of their kinsmen, the priests and the Levites and all who had come to Jerusalem from the captivity. They appointed the Levites, from twenty years old and upward, to supervise **the work** of the house of the Lord."
Here "the work" specifically denotes the physical rebuilding and oversight of the Temple. The Levites are assigned supervisory responsibility over the construction project of the house of the Lord.
Ezra 4:24
"Then **the work** on the house of God that is in Jerusalem stopped, and it ceased until the second year of the reign of Darius king of Persia."
"The work" refers directly to the Temple reconstruction. External opposition caused the building project to halt completely for a period of years.
Ezra 5:8
"Be it known to the king that we went to the province of Judah, to the house of the great God. It is being built with huge stones, and timber is laid in the walls. **This work** goes on diligently and prospers in their hands."
In this official report, "this work" describes the ongoing, successful Temple rebuilding effort.
Ezra 6:7
"Let **the work** on this house of God alone. Let the governor of the Jews and the elders of the

Jews rebuild this house of God on its site."
King Darius's decree uses "the work" for the Temple reconstruction project, commanding that it not be interfered with so the Jews may complete the rebuilding.

Ezra 6:22

"And they kept the Feast of Unleavened Bread seven days with joy, for the Lord had made them joyful and had turned the heart of the king of Assyria to them, so that he aided them in **the work** of the house of God, the God of Israel."
"The work of the house of God" refers to the completed Temple project. Divine guidance is credited for turning a foreign king's heart to support and aid the rebuilding.

Ezra 2:69

"According to their ability they gave to the treasury of **the work** 61,000 darics of gold, 5,000 minas of silver, and 100 priests' garments."
"The work" here once again refers to the Temple rebuilding project. Freewill offerings were given into a dedicated treasury to fund the construction and related needs.

4. Nehemiah (wall and restoration work):

Nehemiah 2:18

"And I told them of the hand of my God that had been upon me for good, and also of the words that the king had spoken to me. And they said, 'Let us rise up and build.' So they strengthened their hands for **the good work**."
"The good work" refers to the rebuilding of Jerusalem's wall (religious life centered on the Temple). The people respond with resolve and strengthened commitment to the project.

Nehemiah 4:19

"And I said to the nobles and to the officials and to the rest of the people, '**The work** is great and widely spread, and we are separated on the wall, far from one another.'"
"The work" describes the extensive wall-rebuilding project.

Nehemiah 6:3

"And I sent messengers to them, saying, 'I am doing a **great work** and I cannot come down. Why should **the work** stop while I leave it and come down to you?'"
Nehemiah calls the wall reconstruction "a great work." He refuses distraction so that the project will not be interrupted.

From the above, what can be ascertained, "the work" primarily refers to the building or restoration of the Temple (or house of God) and related service.

5. Additional related references

Deuteronomy 33:11

"Bless, O Lord, his substance, and accept **the work** of his hands; crush the loins of his adversaries, of those who hate him, that they rise not again."
In Moses' blessing on Levi, "the work of his hands" refers to the tribe's priestly and Levitical service (teaching, offering sacrifices, and guarding the sanctuary). It appears to tie in with Christian spiritual duty (Matthew 11:12; 2 Corinthians 10:4; 2 Timothy 2:3).

Proverbs 16:3

"Commit **your work** to the Lord, and your plans will be established."
Here "work" refers to ordinary human endeavours and plans. For us to entrust one's labour and projects to the Lord so that they may be established by Him.

Isaiah 26:12

"O Lord, you will ordain peace for us, for you have indeed done for us all **our works."**
"All our works" acknowledges that every accomplishment of God's people is ultimately due to

God Himself and thus He must be thanked, praised and glorified. The term refers to His enablement behind our efforts.

Isaiah 28:21

"For the Lord will rise up as on Mount Perazim; as in the Valley of Gibeon he will be roused; to do his deed - strange is His deed! and **to work his work** - alien is his work!"

"His work" refers to the Lord's own severe actions against His people. It is described as "strange" and "alien" because it is unexpected judgment. Cp Isaiah 29:14.

2.0 New Testament Usage

In the New Testament – "the work," "work of the Lord," "God's workmanship," refers to spiritual building of the church, operations of the ministry, evangelism, and good works.

1 Corinthians 3:9

"For we are God's **fellow workers**. You are God's field, God's building."

The context of building the church.

1 Corinthians 3:12–17

"For no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ.
Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw - **each one's work will become manifest**, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test **what sort of work** each one has done.
If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward.
If anyone's **work is burned up**, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire.
Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him. For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple."

Believers (individually and corporately) are God's holy temple; therefore the work of building and caring for the church must be done with reverence, purity, and care, because damaging it invites God's judgment.

1 Corinthians 15:58

"Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in **the work of the Lord**, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain."

A key verse on keep on keeping on expending time and energy on that which God gives Christians to do.

Ephesians 2:10

"For **we are his workmanship**, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them."

The is the central verse on believers as God's handiwork.

Ephesians 4:11–12

"And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for **the work of ministry**, for building up the body of Christ."

These verses show that Christ gives the Church leaders specifically so that every believer is equipped and activated for the work of service, resulting in the growth and strengthening of the church. The New Testament writings of Paul demonstrate that gifts and talents of the members must be used by the ministry and not prevented.

Philippians 1:6
"And I am sure of this, that he who began **a good work in you** will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ."
Philippians 2:13
"For it is God who works in you, both to will and **to work for His good pleasure**."
These verses speak of character development which is the 'bottom line' for Christians.

Colossians 1:10 (ESV)
"so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him: **bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God."**
A life that pleases the Lord is marked by continual fruitfulness in good works that flow from and lead to deeper knowledge of God and His things.

2 Timothy 4:5
"But as for you, always be sober-minded, endure suffering, **do the work of an evangelist**, fulfill your ministry."
Here we have evangelistic "work" which means outreach.

Titus 3:8, 14
"The saying is trustworthy, and I want you to insist on these things, so that those who have believed in God may be careful to devote themselves **to good works**. These things are excellent and profitable for people. … And let our people learn to devote themselves **to good works**, so as to help cases of urgent need, and not be unfruitful."
Those who have believed are to be intentional and diligent in good works - especially meeting practical needs - so that their faith remains productive and beneficial to others!

Hebrews 13:21
"equip you with everything good that you may do his will, **working in us** that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen."
God Himself supplies everything needed so that His people can do His will; He works in them what is pleasing to Him, and all the glory goes to Christ.

3.0 Greenberry G. Rupert

Greenberry G. Rupert provides some of the clearest pre-Herbert Armstrong uses of "this work" and "the work of God" as a commission to spread the Gospel.

In the article **"Reformation"** (*The Remnant of Israel*, Volume 2, No. 17, 1917, p. 3), Rupert wrote: "**This work** is not of man. It did not come from man but from God." Immediately following he added: "So don't look at it as **the work** of any man for it is not…" and further invited readers: "Come and be one of the co-laborers and servants of the Lord with us…" This is one of the clearest early twentieth-century examples of "this work" being treated as a specific divine enterprise rather than a generic activity.

In the same article Rupert also contrasted earlier reformations with the present message: "…the reformation by Luther and his followers. We can safely say **that work** was nothing to be compared to the truth we now have to teach the people…"

Support for the publishing effort is explicitly linked to "this work" by Lucile Rupert Smith's in "To the Readers of The Remnant," *The Remnant of Israel*, Volume 6, No. 2, February 1923, p. 4): "As

Sister Smith has consented to go ahead with the publishing of the Remnant, shall we not rally in support of **this work**?"

A still later example appears in *The Remnant of Israel*, Volume 7, No. 7, July 1925, p. 6: "... keep it till the **work of God** is over..."

4.0 Church of God (Seventh Day) and Andrew Dugger

The Church of God (Seventh Day) had already developed the terminology by the early twentieth century, well before Herbert Armstrong and the Radio/Worldwide Church of God.

A 1905 General Conference resolution, recorded in the *History of the Church of God (Seventh Day)* by Richard Nickels, reaffirmed belief that "tithes and offerings as the Bible means of supporting **the work**." (Chapter VIII) The use of the term "Work" is significant because it refers to the organised mission and outreach of the church and predates Mr Armstrong by roughly 25-30 years.

Historical accounts of Jacob Brinkerhoff likewise speak of "the Work" as a technical term. One retrospective states that "Single handedly, it seems he had prevented the total collapse of the Work," again using the phrase for the organized mission of the church (ibid, p. 55)).

Andrew Dugger's administration is consistently described in the same language. A historical account notes: "Recognizing that no **Work** of any consequence could be done with the meager amount of monies coming into the headquarters in Stanberry, Missouri..." (Robert Coulter, *The Journey: A History of the Church of God (Seventh Day)*, pp. 41-42). It demonstrates that CG7 historians understood Dugger's ministry in terms of "the Work." Other literature surrounding Dugger repeatedly refers to "the Work," expansion of "the Work," support of "the Work," and financing "the Work" during his years of leadership.

The strongest primary evidence for Dugger's own wording apparently lies in the *Bible Advocate* (1914–1932), *The Bible Home Instructor* (1917), General Conference reports, and Dugger correspondence held in the Friends of the Sabbath archive. All this demonstrates from Dugger's own pen and the Church's usage of the term "the Work," it is self-evident that this was already well established in Church of God (Seventh Day) circles decades before Mr Armstrong began to employ and expand the concept.

5.0 Examples of its Use in the old Worldwide Church of God

With the above in mind, we can now explore how and why Herbert W Armstrong used the term "the Work."

The earliest clear references by Herbert W. Armstrong to "the Work" (or "this Work," "the Work of God," "God's Work") in the sense of the undertaking to proclaim the true Gospel (of the Kingdom of God) to the world date to the mid-1930s, and is linked with the start of the regular radio broadcast (first Sunday in January 1934) and the first issue of *The Plain Truth* (1 February 1934).

Mr Armstrong later repeatedly dated the beginning of "this present era" / "today's Work" to mid-1933 (Jeans schoolhouse meetings that produced the parent congregation of 19 members) and its public media launch to January-February 1934. The 1930s *Plain Truth* issues are appear to be sparse in using the term and mostly prophetic/editorial; however, the term "the Work" was used

even in those days as shorthand for the Gospel commission – this term becomes more frequent in coworker/bulletin letters of the late 1930s–1940s and in later magazine articles.

Below are a few representative quotations drawn from various periodicals and coworker letters.

Coworker Letters (and related Bulletins / Co-Workers' Bulletins)
These are among the earliest continuous sources using the language.

- 20 December 1934: "The Lord has very graciously blessed the work of the RADIO CHURCH OF GOD during the year now closing. ... Remember, this is entirely a **WORK OF FAITH**!"
- 14 May 1941: "Dear CO-WORKERS in the services of Christ ... **this work** has grown until a quarter of a million souls are now reached every Sunday. ... The true GOSPEL, and the last WARNING Message has continued going out in power. ... 'This Gospel of the KINGDOM,' says Jesus, 'shall be preached in all the world for a witness unto all nations; and then shall the END come!'"
- Multiple 1940s-1950s letters "NO ONE ELSE ON EARTH, EXCEPT THIS VERY **WORK OF GOD**, IS PROCLAIMING THIS TRUE GOSPEL OF CHRIST TO THE WHOLE WORLD, PRECISELY AS JESUS SAID IT WAS TO BE PROCLAIMED IN MAT 24:14 and MARK 13:10!!! ... this work of proclaiming Christ's true GOSPEL ... It was **GOD'S work** and He blessed and prospered it."
- Later coworker letters continue the term: "the Work" = the collective effort (prayers, tithes, labour) that helps to the preaching of the true Gospel message and warning ministry which is also "the Work."

Plain Truth
Early 1930s issues of *The Plain Truth* emphasise the message itself more than the phrase "the Work." Later *Plain Truth* Personals and autobiographical instalments look back and apply the term retrospectively to 1934.

- "Born in adversity in the very depths of the Depression, this **Work of God** was destined to grow to worldwide power. ... this is the **WORK OF GOD**, not of man; and the vision and the planning has been that of Jesus Christ, the active, living HEAD of **this Work**, not of man." ("The Plain Truth Is Published," *Plain Truth*, August 1960, pp. 11-14 (and later combined in the *Autobiography of Herbert W. Armstrong*, Volume 1).
- And exactly what was this Work?: "In the light of fast-developing, world-encircling events, it became apparent that what was actually happening in 1934 was precisely this: Jesus Christ was opening the gigantic mass-media DOOR of radio and the printing press for the proclaiming of His same original GOSPEL to all the world! On that tiny-powered radio station KORE - in that infant mimeographed *Plain Truth*—was going out an astonishing Message!" (ibid)
- "All these operations, worldwide, we customarily speak of, among ourselves, as **'the Work.' So, just what do we mean—'the Work'?** ... After Jesus qualified ... He was then ready to begin GOD'S WORK. Religious people call that Work 'preaching the Gospel.' It is that—and more! ... **THIS WORK** is Christ's SIGN that we are NEAR the end of this world, and the restoring of the GOVERNMENT OF GOD on the earth!" This full explanation of the term, tying it to Matthew 24:14 and the 1934 restart of the Gospel, appears in the "Personal from the Editor," (titled "JUST WHAT IS THE WORK?") *Plain Truth*, January 1975, p. 3.
- The term is used scores of times in the *Plain Truth* – too many times to list.

Good News

- "Just What Is **'The WORK'**? ... The PURPOSE ... is dual: 1) To ANNOUNCE for a witness to the world the coming Kingdom of God (the true Gospel), to prepare the way for Christ's coming. ... As stated above, the WORK of proclaiming the Gospel Jesus brought from GOD was suppressed beginning about A.D. 53, and not proclaimed to the world after A.D. 70, for 100 time cycles. ... **The WORK** consists of proclaiming the Gospel—by radio, by television, in print (booklets, books, *The Plain Truth* ...)." ("Just What Is 'The WORK'?" *The Good News*, April 1981, pp. 2-4, 24. A closely parallel version also appears in the *Pastor General's Report*, 6 February 1981 (Vol. 3, No. 6), p. 1-7)
- "**THE WORK of God**, which the Church had been added to back up and assist, was started by myself, with only my wife as full-time assistant. I started the radio broadcasting program in January 1934, and *The Plain Truth* in February 1934. ... **The Work** GREW" ("Christ Puts Church On Bible Form Of Organization," *The Good News*, 5 June 1978, p. 1).
- "The **Work of God** - the GREAT COMMISSION - started as an infinitesimal operation - a virtual mustard-seed beginning. ... What Christ called me to - what He started and has built through me - is the **WORK OF GOD**, not of MAN." ("And Now - The Plain Truth Being Set Back On Track," *Good News*, 11 September 1978, p. 1).

Worldwide News

- "So just WHAT DO WE MEAN - **THE WORK**? How did it start? Whom did Christ, the living HEAD of the Church, use? ... Jesus Christ now started **the WORK** of His Church (the present WORLDWIDE CHURCH OF GOD) on the air ... on the one small 100-watt radio station KORE, Eugene, the first Sunday in January, 1934. ... Feb. 1, 1934, the first mimeographed edition of *The Plain Truth* came out" ("Just What Is The Work?" *The Worldwide News*, 30 June 1980 (Vol. VIII, No. 13), p. 1).

Conclusion

It is clear from the evidence presented above that the Old Testament "work" centres on physical restoration of the Temple under God's direction while the New Testament is similar and centres on the true believers who have God's holy spirit and also includes outreach or evangelism. His Work entails transformation of believers, the gospel ministry, evangelism, and the building up of the church as His workmanship.

Also, the evidence presently available establishes a clear chronological progression in the use of the expression "the Work" within Church of God literature prior to the 1930s (when Mr Armstrong arose on the scene). The terminology already functioned among Church of God (Seventh Day) and Greenberry Rupert's *Remnant of Israel* groups for the evangelistic, publishing, and outreach of proclaiming the gospel.

So, with all this in mind, it was not only the basic doctrines that Herbert Armstrong inherited from his predecessors, but also terminologies such as this one. And it is Biblical.

However, some members consider God's "Work" to Him only working in us and not expending energies in outreach.

The United Church of God addresses this:

> "The United Church of God believes that it must preach the gospel of the Kingdom of God, and that included in that message is wonderful good news of the banishment of Satan's rule over man. The message also includes the warning from God's Word that there are consequences to sin and that people should repent. It further includes much information from God's Word about events that the sovereign Creator has prophesied to come to pass before Christ returns to establish the Kingdom of God (which is the government of God, administered on this earth by Jesus Christ - Isaiah 9:6-7).
>
> The Church does not believe that it will be pleasing to God to view this preaching of the gospel as merely a nice option, but one that we decline to do at this time. Instead, we are compelled to echo the words of Paul, "woe is me if I do not preach the gospel!" (1 Corinthians 9:16)." (*Preaching the Gospel. Doctrinal Study Paper*, p. 9-10)

Amen to that!

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Appendix. Charles Taze Russell (Bible Students era, 1870s–1916)

Russell and the early Bible Students frequently spoke of "the work," "the Lord's work," "the harvest work," "this great work," and "the work of the Lord."

- In the April 1881 issue of *Zion's Watch Tower* (pp. 7-8), Russell published the article "Wanted 1,000 Preachers**,"** calling for men and women to go forth as colporteurs and evangelists distributing literature and proclaiming the harvest message. He wrote of this as labour in the Lord's vineyard and part of the work of the Watch Tower Tract Society.
- Russell repeatedly referred to the activity of publishing *Zion's Watch Tower*, distributing tracts and the *Studies in the Scriptures* volumes, and preaching as "the work" or "the harvest work." For example, in various *Watch Tower* issues of the 1910s he spoke of "the glorious harvest work that is going on" and urged continued diligence in "the Harvest work."
- In *The Watch Tower* of 15 February 1915, Russell wrote of "a **great work** for all His people, His watching saints, at the present time," noting that "there never was a time like the present" for proclaiming the Truth and that "the Lord's people should be very diligent." (p. 54)
- At Russell's funeral in 1916, William Van Amburgh stated: "This great **worldwide work** is not the work of one person. It is far too great for that. It is God's work and it changes not. God has used many servants in the past and He will doubtless use many in the future." ("One of God's Noblemen," *The Watch Tower*, 1 December 1916, pp. 245-31)

The usage of the term refers to the overall preaching/publishing activity for the entire organisation and its outreach.

Appendix. Later Jehovah's Witnesses (post-1916 to post-1931)

After Russell's death and especially under Joseph Rutherford and subsequent leadership, the vocabulary continued and became more systematic:

- The preaching activity is routinely called "the Kingdom-preaching **work**," "the preaching **work**," "the evangelizing **work**," "Jehovah's **work**," or simply "**the work**." (*1976 Yearbook of the Jehovah's Witnesses*, pp. 24-31)
- Official literature speaks of congregations being "organized for preaching God's Kingdom," of "the global preaching work," and of each Witness having a share in "**the work**."
- Matthew 24:14 remains central, just as it is in Mr Armstrong's writings: the Good News of the Kingdom must be preached worldwide as a witness before the end.
- The organisation itself is presented as the instrument through which this work is carried on. Later Watchtower publications (for example, the 1975 *Yearbook of Jehovah's Witnesses* and the book *Jehovah's Witnesses - Proclaimers of God's Kingdom*) continue to speak of "**the work** already begun" and of the ongoing "preaching **work**" as the central activity of the organisation.

Again, the terminology is frequent and similar in use (but not exactly the same) as that which became characteristic in *The Plain Truth*, *The Good News*, and *The Worldwide News*.