

# The Twelve Tribes

**By Bob Pardon**

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**Founder:** Elbert Eugene Spriggs.

**Founding Date:** Early 1970's.

**Unique Terms:** Yashua, Edah, Twelve Tribes, Messianic Communities, The Vine Community Church, The New Apostolic Order in Messiah, T.H.E. Community, The Community in [city name], The Northeast Kingdom Community Church.

**Publications:** *Freepaper*, *Common Sense Chronicle*, assorted pamphlets.

## HISTORY

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Elbert Eugene Spriggs, founder and "apostle" of the Twelve Tribes (also known by the names given under "unique terms" above) was born May 18, 1937 in East Ridge, Tennessee. Spriggs moved to California in 1970 and shortly thereafter was divorced for the third time. It was then that he came to realize that he was unable to function without the Lord in his life. Thus, one evening on the beach at Carpenteria, he gave his life to the Lord.

He married for the fourth time and moved back to Chattanooga, Tennessee, where he rented a small building and turned it into a sandwich shop. This was the first Yellow Deli, a place where people could be evangelized, and for those who were saved, a place to focus their lives. Eventually, there were delis and group houses all over the South.

As the Vine Christian Community Church (as it was then known) was changing, so was Spriggs and his view of Christianity. He became intensely disillusioned with the organized church. Thus, he began teaching that the organized Christian Church was "the Whore of Babylon." No longer would he join with those outside the Vine Community to worship God. This growing isolation created a diminishing accountability.

However, one group of individuals he did initially connect with was former staff members of Campus Crusade of Christ: Pete Gilquist, Ray Netherly and Gordon Walker. They shared Spriggs' disillusionment. On July 4, 1976, they ordained Spriggs as an apostle.

Amidst mounting controversy on a variety of fronts, the Vine Community made the decision to move to Island Pond, Vermont. There, they became known as the Northeast Kingdom Community Church (NKCC).

At first, things were relatively peaceful. But soon, some of the issues that challenged them in the South began to rear their head in Vermont. Based upon reports of children being beaten with sticks, charges of child abuse were aimed at the NKCC. In June 1984, Vermont State troopers raided the group and removed 112 children. However, after the courts found the raid illegal, all the children were returned to their parents without any determination on the allegations.

In the early 1990s the NKCC owned at least eighteen properties, including residences and businesses in Island Pond. These included a garage, a small logging operation, a retail shoe store, and cottage industries manufacturing candles, soaps, leather goods, and futons. Over the years these businesses have greatly expanded. Currently, they

manufacture a high quality line of furniture, some of which was sold through Robert Redford's Sundance company. They also produced part of the "Origins" cosmetics line for Estée Lauder. However, the group was found to be using child labor in the manufacture of these products, and lost all contracts. In 2001, the Communities' *Freepaper* lists twenty-seven different locations where they can be found comprising approximately 2,500–3,000 members. These locations extend around the world.

## DOCTRINES

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**The Work of Christ:** Spriggs teaches that Jesus needed to have confirmation about God's will regarding the cross in order for His death to be efficacious. Thus, Jesus prayed intently in the garden. Otherwise, He would have gone to the cross in the flesh and not atoned for sins.<sup>1</sup> Also, His death does not cover "intentional sins" once a person becomes a believer. Christ's death only covers a believer's unintentional sin. As Spriggs states, "No sacrifice is left."<sup>2</sup>

However, not only are there sins that are not covered by the death of Christ for the faithful, but most damning, Spriggs teaches that there are *three* eternal destinies: those who make it to the Holy City (Twelve Tribes); those who are consigned to the Lake of Fire; and worthy members of the nations who escape damnation apart from the death of Christ.<sup>3</sup>

These worthy ones from the nations are not in the Holy City itself. Rather, they reside outside the City, being ruled over by the Twelve Tribes. They are "saved" from damnation by living according to their conscience. Consequently, it is possible to be declared righteous by God apart from the death of His Son.

According to Spriggs, those in the nations will also have the ability to propagate "forever and ever." But because the universe is endless, "it cannot fill up." Twelve Tribes members living in the Holy City do not have this ability to propagate. However, they rule forever with Yashua over the nations.<sup>4</sup>

**The Twelve Tribes of Israel:** Spriggs' Twelve Tribes is God's end-time restoration of the twelve tribes of Israel, commissioned to prepare for the heavenly "Bridegroom" to return. According to Spriggs, God's original intent was that the early church, Jews and Gentiles, would restore the original twelve tribes of Israel. However, due to the acquisition of possessions, and the cessation of living communally, the early church disqualified itself.

**Salvation:** It does the believer no good to rest in the finished work of Christ on the cross. This is only half of the gospel according to the Twelve Tribes. True salvation also involves:

*Divestment of all Possessions:* The keeping of possessions is what brought the downfall of the early church. Thus, the Twelve Tribes teach that all one's "worldly goods" need to be given away, preferably to the apostles of the Twelve Tribes.

*Unity:* Another key component of the gospel according to the Twelve Tribes is living in unity. This is an absolute unity that will involve sharing everything in common, agreeing on all points of doctrine (as taught by Spriggs), giving absolute obedience to the leadership, dressing alike, etc. This unity can *only* come through living in community (Acts 2:42-47; 4:32-35). As Spriggs states, "There can't be any anger, not even a difference of opinion, between brothers and sisters."<sup>5</sup>

*Sabbath:* Keeping the Sabbath is also a necessary part of the gospel. Failure to keep it contributed to the demise of the early church.

**Racism:** Spriggs teaches that Genesis 9:25-27 identifies three races of humanity: Shem (white Caucasians), Ham (black skinned people) and Japheth (Asians). Ham, according to Spriggs, is to be a *perpetual slave/servant* to Shem outside the Twelve Tribes. If he denies this identification of his person and function he will not inherit the nations,

but have only the Lake of Fire as his future estate. However, when a black person (Ham) enters into the Twelve Tribes he is now saved, and truly free. However, Ham must still lead in servitude, being by *nature* a servant:

This is what Ham should be like in the world, like black nannies...They were to be helper to Shem.. 'Niger' [*sic*] means black. When people first started saying this word, it wasn't bad...Before civil rights black men would say, 'Yes, boss man,' in the south [*sic*]...This was respect. We need respect in people...Ham must get this respect in them...They got along well because they were submissive... <sup>6</sup>

## BIBLICAL RESPONSE

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**Death of Jesus:** Jesus continuously prophesied the nature of His death (Matt. 12:40; 16:21; 17:9, 22-23; 20:18; 27:63), not as some potential eventuality that needed God's confirmation, but as God's express will. His concern in the garden was not whether the cross was God's will, but if there was *any other* way to accomplish that will.

**Salvation:** Justification is the *cornerstone* of Christian doctrine, a declaration by God that the Law has been satisfied. This Law, like its Author, is unchanging. It is satisfied by nothing less than a perfect righteousness, at once fulfilling the precept, and suffering the penalty.

Man's inability to offer anything to God by way of reconciliation is clearly stated throughout Scripture (Gen. 6:5; Isa. 64:6; Isa. 53: 6; Jer. 17:9; 31:33-34). The method of justification in Scripture is the *imputed* righteousness of Christ. Scriptures are clear that He is the end of the Law for righteousness, and we are made the righteousness of God in Him (Rom. 3:24; 5:9,19; 8:1; 10:4; 1 Cor. 1:30; 6:11; 2 Cor. 5:21; Phil. 3:9). Paul repeatedly asserts that we are not justified by our own righteousness (Gal. 2:16; Phil. 3:9). The creation of a category of judgment by God based upon one's conscience and "unintentional sins" is absolutely contrary to Scripture. It also demeans the finished work of Christ upon the cross.

The death of Christ also covers "intentional sins" committed after becoming a believer (Heb. 10:10-14; Rev. 13:8). Thus, the *totality* of all the sins of a believer's life were placed upon Christ. Sin is sin, whether intentional or unintentional.

**Israel:** Spriggs refers to Revelation 7 as a proof that the twelve tribes of Israel will be restored in eternity. However, John's list in chapter 7 agrees with no known list in Scripture. If this list is intended to be interpreted literally, these twelve tribes cannot represent actual Israel. In Ezekiel 48 the final salvation of Israel is depicted with the land of Palestine being divided up amongst the twelve tribes. If John is intending to describe the twelve tribes in eternity it would be expected that his list would be consistent with the list in Ezekiel 48. However, John omits both the tribe of Dan and Ephraim. This cannot be reconciled unless the twelve tribes in John's list were not intended to be taken literally, but rather, as true spiritual Israel.

**Communal Living:** Acts 2:43-47; 4:32-37 are not intended to establish communal living where all is shared in common. The historical books simply describe what was, not necessarily what "ought" to be. There is also the story of Zaccheus in Luke 19:1-10. Never once does Jesus demand that Zaccheus give all his possessions away to be His true disciple. Then there is the example of Peter in Matthew 8:14. Jesus went to *Peter's house* to heal his mother-in-law. Either Peter had not truly given up everything to follow Jesus, or the Twelve Tribes has misunderstood what is meant by "forsaking all."

Clearly there was a class of Christians in the early Church who were rich, but were encouraged to be generous (1 Tim. 6:17-19). The presumption of private ownership is found throughout Paul's writings. In 1 Corinthians 16:1-2 and 2 Corinthians 9:7 each believer is encouraged to set aside a portion of that which has come from God's prospering.

When Paul defines the *essence* of the Gospel in I Corinthians 15:1-4 the need to live in community is absent. Why does he not mention living in community if it is “impossible to obey His word outside the ‘Community of Believers’” according to the Twelve Tribes? In Philippians 4:22 some believers belonged to “Caesar’s household.” Being members of “Caesar’s household” it would be extremely difficult to live in community. The Jerusalem Council in Acts 15 is another very important case in point. If living in community is essential, this first council leaves out something critical and practical for salvation. Elsewhere in the Book of Acts neither the Ethiopian eunuch, nor Cornelius the centurion are told they must live in community (Acts 8 and 10).

**Sabbath:** The New Testament *never* speaks of the Sabbath as a seal or sign of the New Covenant, yet, it is consistently called this of the Old Covenant/Sinaitic Covenant (Ex. 31:13, 17; 20:12,20). It functioned as the dynastic seal of the Old Covenant, validating its authenticity. The Holy Spirit functions as that same seal in the New Covenant, which the Christian receives upon exercising true belief (Eph. 1:13-14; 4:30; 2 Cor. 1:21-22). Within the New Covenant, Christians are never encouraged to remember the Sabbath. Instead, believers are to be baptized (Matt. 28:19; Rom. 6:3-4) as a public proclamation of faith in Christ and to identify with His death, burial and resurrection. They are also told to celebrate the Lord’s Supper “in remembrance of” Him (1 Cor. 11:23-26). Thus, baptism and the Lord’s supper are New Covenant signs.

**Racism:** In Genesis 9:25-27 the curse fell on Canaan, the youngest son of Ham. Thus, the emphasis is upon Ham’s succession, and not his person. For his violation of the sanctity of the family, his own family would suffer. This would occur within a restricted branch of his family, the Canaanites. Spriggs, who seems to understand the Hamitic people in general as being cursed, has misread the Old Testament as well as the New Testament.<sup>7</sup> In tracing the origin of the races the issue is where the sons and grandsons of Noah settled. People-groups can be traced linguistically and archaeologically throughout the Middle East. Evidence indicates that Ham’s son, Canaan, settled in the area of present day Israel.<sup>8</sup> It was his sons, Cush and Mizraim, who settled in Northern Africa and along the eastern side of the continent, thus developing into the African nations and dark skinned people. It is also likely that the subjugation of the Canaanites by Joshua (Josh. 9:23) and Solomon (I Kin. 9:21) fulfilled Genesis 9:25-27. Thus, Canaan became the brunt of Noah’s curse.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> *Reasoning 2* (November 19, 1990), 8-9.

<sup>2</sup> *Sexuality* (October 1989), 6.

<sup>3</sup> Messianic Communities does not believe that they will be the only ones resident in the Holy City. Certainly there will be Old and New Testament people. However, after the church died out in the first century there has not existed a Body of believers until Spriggs came on the scene. When pressed about this Eddie Wiseman told us, “Hypothetically it is possible for there to be other believers (down through Church history)...others who would be in the Holy City. But the Church doesn’t come up and decline, come up and decline over Church history. Once the Stone Kingdom is raised up in the last days it will never end.”

<sup>4</sup> *Ahavah*, First Day Teaching (April 23, 1989), 9.

<sup>5</sup> *Gospel in Brazil* (May 24, 1992), 1.

<sup>6</sup> *Unraveling the Races of Man* (November 22, 1988), 2, 3.

<sup>7</sup> In the New Testament the gospel does not come upon the scene in the guise of a new social program, nor does it overthrow the existing social order by force. Rather it enters the existing social structure and transforms it from within. Witness the rise of hospitals, prison reform, public education, etc., as a consequence of biblical principles filtering all through the social structure. Paul’s letter to Philemon is illustrative of this. The manner in which Paul reintroduces Onesimus to his master totally undermines the master-slave relationship and replaces it with another, higher relationship, as a brother in Christ. See Herman Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of His Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 317ff.

<sup>8</sup> See Derek Kidner, *Genesis* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1976). *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, Frank Gaebelein, ed., vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1990).