

Commentary — From the Margins

Another Tragedy: More Questions

Oregon, May 1968: I had a gunshop along the central coast. I was one year in business and twenty-one years old. I was married, with one newly born daughter, a six-month old Ford Bronco, and a shop full of rifles to blue or to stock. I had spent a year in Oregon Tech's Small Arms Technology program. My skills as a gunmaker were developing, as was my conservatism. At a dawn campaign stop, Bob Packwood stuck his hand out and asked for my vote. I shook hands with him, and on the basis of a single issue—gun control—I voted for him as did most everyone I knew, thereby ousting longtime Senator Wayne Morse when Eugene McCarthy delivered a defeat to Robert Kennedy. One week later, following the California primary, Robert Kennedy was shot, and a nation-wide call for gun control left me believing that private ownership of firearms would be prohibited before the socialist nightmare envisioned in Orwell's *1984* became a milestone.

A lot of tragedies have involved firearms since 1968, the latest in this country to occur was a week ago in the Living Church of God services in Wisconsin. Curtis Freeman, research professor of theology at Duke University's Divinity school, on Monday called the Living Church of God an unusual denomination that fosters a sense of "apocalyptic paranoia." He went on to say, "This heightened sense of 'the end' and the belief that they are the select few in an evil world creates an atmosphere of paranoia and pessimism"... what did Orwell's *1984*, required high school reading, create but paranoia and pessimism?

A bomb kills as effectively as a gun and with greater indiscrimination. Yet Israelis, where paranoia and pessimism might be justified, live with the daily threat of suicide bombers.

As a twelve-year-old high school freshman in 1959, I was first exposed to endtime biblical prophecies that seemed more tangled than the backlashes in the True Temper baitcasting reel I used salmon fishing. My dad had died a year and a half earlier. Mom would, within a few weeks, marry a Seventh Day Adventist, a decent but poorly educated man that I didn't then respect. I refused to believe that the whole world could be wrong, except for the Adventists, the only Sabbath-observing Christian church of which I knew. So I set about to prove my stepfather wrong ... was it paranoia and pessimism that convinced me that if a person were to believe in God (I didn't want to), the law remained in effect. Christians were no longer under the law, for the law was now inside the person, written on hearts and minds. Murder committed with the hand had become anger or hate committed with the mind. Adultery committed with the body had become lust committed with the mind. The Sabbath wasn't changed to another day, but went from what the body did on the seventh day to what the mind thought. What had been outside had relocated itself to inside the person. Luckily for me, or so I thought at the time, I was strong enough to resist the lure of myths and historical nonsense.

Instead, I hunted yearround. Firearms became first an interest, then a hobby, and finally a vocation—and I sold rifles to many coastal residents who suffered from paranoia and pessimism, who planned to defend themselves against an oppressive government that would have to *pry their guns from their cold, dead fingers*. None of these pessimists were overtly religious. They were, if anything, survivalists, bent on defending what was theirs from all takers. They were the pinnacle of being physically or naturally minded. God didn't enter into their sight pictures as they practiced hitting very small targets at extreme ranges. I had a five-hundred-yard range alongside the house. Plenty of these fellows could hit a paper plate at five hundred yards their first shot and every shot after that. A few could consistently hit a target the size of a coffee mug with every shot at five hundred yards. And this was with hunting rifles, not benchrest rifles.

These irreligious survivalists practiced shooting because they believed that society would soon collapse, their belief fostered by the increasing impingement of civil liberties. But the firearms related tragedies of the 1970s didn't involve these survivalists, who were willing to live and let live. And after a decade or two of intense paranoia, these survivalists had quit believing that it mattered what the government did. They grew weary of shooting the same targets, so the year 1984 quietly passed. Western fervor for rebellion or succession ebbed away. James Watt successfully turned, as President Reagan directed, the Sagebrush Rebellion into a historical footnote.

A new generation of paramilitary survivalists emerged, a generation unknown to me and seemingly dangerous to society [because of their unfamiliarity]. Although some of this new generation subscribes to the two-house (of Israel) doctrine, most are of Sunday observing denominations that would be identified by Professor Freeman as the evangelical mainstream. They have a *heightened sense of the end*, caused not by their belief in Jesus but by the ever-increasing impingement of civil liberties, dramatically seen on the red-blue maps following the 2000 and 2004 elections. They are familiar with Ruby Ridge and Waco. They know what they would do differently when they are attacked—and the less radical of this generation have become involved with politics. They support President Bush. They home school their children. They are the pillars of communities, and they worry about an out-of-control Federal government that seems barely willing or able to defend them from a one-world government. Theirs is the voice of reasonable and rational thought, for behind them are those who have purchased new Chinese or used U.S. military weapons, and who will not give these weapons up short of them being pried from their cold dead fingers.

Unto this stage of paranoia and pessimism, the Living Church of God is a pacifist, a fellowship that spurns violence and abstains from military service. Like its theological predecessor, the former Worldwide Church of God, the Living Church of God continues to teach much of the prophetic misunderstanding borrowed directly from the Reform movement, which saw the Roman Empire and the Roman Church as endtime beasts, bent upon world domination. Because of its acceptance of the two-house doctrine, the Living Church of God doesn't understand that it isn't the physical descendants of Israel that will again go into

captivity, but the spiritually circumcised nation that was long ago taken captive by lawlessness.

The law went from outside to inside. Circumcision went from outside to inside. Israel went from being a nation outwardly identified by circumcision to a nation inwardly identified by circumcision of the heart. And the Israel that will be liberated at the end of the age is the nation that includes in its citizenry Professor Freeman. It is not a physical nation, but a spiritual nation that was sent into captivity because it would not keep the laws of God and because it profaned the Sabbaths of God, the same reasons the physical nation was sent into captivity (Ezek chptr 20).

The error the Living Church of God makes is not recognizing that many others beside themselves have the Spirit of God.

Terry Ratzmann is an anomaly, an individual influenced by more than paranoia and pessimism. If he had intended to kill others beyond those that he did murder, he would not have left the rest of the box of ammo at home. Apparently, he lost track of how many rounds he fired. He knew he had to take his own life. He killed himself with four rounds left. The miracle is that four additional people were not harmed.

In 1972, a bunch of us who had been shooting were sitting around a campfire. One fellow asked, “Whatever happened to Dave Oleman.” Another fellow said, “He got religion,” as if religion were a contagious disease. Then Gary Gettman, assistant pulpmill superintendent, said, “You’ll never know who will fall next.” I knew who was next. I was. A thought that had the apparent substance of a thing said you’re next, I’m next.

I didn’t want to be religious; I wasn’t looking for answers. I was perfectly content building guns and hunting yearround in rural Oregon. However, within months, I was attending WCG services in Salem, Oregon. Not because of paranoia and pessimism. I wasn’t particularly interested in biblical prophecy. But because I knew of no other fellowship that kept the Sabbaths [plural] of God.

It isn’t a steady diet of paranoia and pessimism that causes irrational behavior. Rather, a diet of doom and gloom wears a person thin in a short while. The passing of time continues. Europe, even if suddenly hostile, is far less of a threat than the former Soviet Union was. In high school, we discussed the USSR’s detonation of a 100-megaton device. Calculations were made that if three such devices were properly placed along the ring of fire, humankind could turn the earth into another asteroid belt. We calculated where Russian Bear bombers would dump their payloads if they had to abort a mission over the Pacific Northwest—where I went to high school would’ve been the most likely weapons drop point. So the paranoia and pessimism associated with fulfilled biblical prophecies was so miniscule as to not be calculable. But then, the essence of Christianity is belief that end of the age will soon occur.

Prophecies sealed until the time of the end have now been unsealed. Unfortunately, the Living Church of God doesn’t understand these prophecies, or the timing of their fulfillment.

The spiritually circumcised nation has been living through a single, long spiritual night of watching since the House of God's paschal lamb was sacrificed at Calvary. It has eaten of this lamb with its feet shod, its loins girded, and its staff in hand; it has been watching and waiting for Jesus' return throughout this period of spiritual darkness. And the midnight hour is at hand, when the spiritually circumcised nation will be [liberated](#) as the physically circumcised nation was.

Professor Freeman rightly identifies the failings of the Living Church of God—"The presiding evangelist and council of elders make decisions, and church members simply obey"—but he fails to understand that it isn't the so-called theologically eccentric tenets held by the LCG that is the problem. Rather, it is the absence of individual evangelism that leaves members frustrated and separated from both the world and from the hierarchy of the organization. A Terry Ratzmann can live for years as a faithful member while having very little human interaction, but the Body of Christ doesn't consist of loners. The oneness of Father and Son and disciples is an attribute made necessary by the timelessness of the heavenly realm. All that is in heaven must co-exist with all that was and all that will be in a dance of oneness that incorporates every glorified child of God into one body.

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