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Commentary — From the Margins

On “Pondering the Great Tribulation”

For years, the question nagged her: if her parents had to eat one of their kids, who would it be? Now, living as a Jew on the upper West Side of Manhattan, Angela Himself wonders if her sins will be forgiven and will she be written in the Book of Life? She remembers that the world was going to end in 1975, that all flesh would perish, that the great God was going to spank this world and spank hard with droughts, starvation, parents eating children. She remembers that brethren were to be lifted into the sky and transported on eagles' wings to a Place of Safety. And her questions and memories are indictments of not just the Worldwide Church of God, the Sabbath-keeping evangelical church her parents attended in Evansville, Indiana, but of all Christianity. For the physically minded Worldwide Church of God was both the product of and a reaction to what the greater Church had taught disciples of Christ Jesus during the previous nineteen centuries.

In her essay, “Pondering the Great Tribulation” (October 2, 2005 edition of *The New York Times*), Angela Himself says she “decided to forswear demons and destruction and convert to Judaism, a religion that worried less than [she] would like about God’s plan and salvation, but one that encouraged [her] to keep one foot firmly rooted in physical soil” (8th par.). But she still thinks about the multiple sermons pounded into her about not leaving the church, about not being left behind when the world ended...

Feast of Tabernacles, Squaw Valley, 1973: Al Portune delivered a strong sermon about not leaving the church, Herbert Armstrong’s Worldwide Church of God, regardless of who might fall away. Six months later, he was gone. The laity never received an explanation for why he had left—he was just gone, an alleged casualty in the plan of God.

Feast of Tabernacles, Spokane, 1975: Dr. Charles Hunting delivered a strong sermon about not leaving the church. Six months later, he was gone. And the list goes on, with a terrific number of “casualties” among the ministry that brought messages about the end of the world, about the United States and Great Britain going into national captivity to a ten-nation European power headed by Germany, about the church going to Petra or some other place of safety, about anyone who left the church being forever lost. Fear was packaged as if it were laundry soap—and though its wrapper has changed a little, fear is still sold to the generation that believed Armstrong about the world ending in 1975. And perhaps fear is needed for these aged disciples to continue scouring sin out of their lives.

There is no love in fear.

What the Worldwide Church of God lacked throughout the decade of the 1970s was love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, self-control—eight of nine facets of the fruit of the Breath of God [Pneuma 'Agion]. What it had was faithfulness, and it was faithful

to a fault.

The 1970s saw Garner Ted Armstrong's philandering embarrass the church. There was no true "goodness" in the silvery voice of the church's number two man (and there were no women in leadership positions). There was no "self-control" when Garner Ted shot that Alaskan moose in 1975. And again, so it went throughout the church, from top down to the person setting up chairs in local congregations. Love was merely another casualty in the plan of God although many were the sermons that incorporated chapter thirteen of Paul's first epistle to saints at Corinth. Somehow, though, love came with dollar signs: a member of the church expressed his or her love for God and neighbor through how much the person was willing to financially sacrifice so that the work could grow, thereby reaching millions more who needed to hear the endtime gospel message about the soon-coming kingdom of God. Love wasn't about actually helping one's neighbor, for the dead were to bury the dead. Let the dead provide the dead with every need the dead might have, except for this very special warning and witness about a soon-coming kingdom. Delivering this witness was the exclusive task of a Philadelphia church that only talked about brotherly love.

What Angela Himsel couldn't understand was just how little love was ever in the church of her youth. What basis for comparison did she have? What basis for comparison did any young person reared in the church have? The same basis as the priest and the Levite that crossed to the other side of the road (Luke 10:29-37) had—Samaritans were of the world, and were out in the world. They were not in the church.

Besides, it wasn't the person who would go to the place of safety that would eat his or her children: it was those who were "nominal" Christians, or those who were Jewish, or Buddhist, or Muslim, or nothing at all. God would feed the 144,000 who would be safely hidden from the prying eyes of a starving world. And herewith entered the terminal fallacy: what would happen when there were more than 144,000 baptized members? The number of members was, by the middle of the 1970s, approaching 100,000, which further convinced the faithful that what the church taught was absolutely correct.

The Worldwide Church of God of the 1970s imploded in the 1990s before it could flee to a place of safety, before it greatly exceeded 144,000 baptized members.

Thankfully, the Armstrongs safely rest in the grave, as does the Worldwide Church of God of Angela Himsel's youth. Yet the plan of God continues towards a period in human history unlike any previous period. The prophets Angela still reads wrote of this period when Israel would be recovered from Assyria, from death, thus causing Israel's exodus from Egypt, from sin, to no longer be remembered. The prophets she still reads wrote about a time when the house of Israel and the house of Judah would come under a new covenant that had the commandments of God written on her heart and placed into her mind. She is not yet lost, for salvation will be to all who endure in faith to the end, for all who spurn hypocrisy while practicing walking uprightly before man and God. And for her, part of enduring is remembering those rows of folding metal chairs in a rented building, when her parents sacrificed financially so that she would hear messages about this world being temporal, and

God eternal. The messages began fine, but they were uttered by a ministry that had no understanding of biblical prophecy, and if possible, even less understanding about the character of the Father and the Son.

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