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This Present Paranoia

By Kim Riddlebarger

“This world is not my home, I’m just a’ passing through, my treasures are laid up somewhere beyond the blue,” goes the refrain of a popular American hymn. Whether aware of it or not, evangelicals are engaged in a war with modern American culture. The world is understood to be a very evil place, and America is no longer thought of as a paradigm of moral virtue. Thus evangelicals do their best to exist in a society that they feel is increasingly hostile to their cause. The goal held out to the weary faithful is to somehow survive as unwelcome pilgrims in a world and culture that is not thought of as “home,” but merely as a place to endure, to just “pass through” while awaiting the eschaton and the return of Christ. In the midst of this uneasy tension, many American evangelicals, not surprisingly, reflect a good degree of fear and suspicion of the world around them—a kind of paranoia if you will.

As recent trends seem to point out, there are several very disturbing indications that this hostility may in fact, be in the process of becoming mutual. American evangelicals are viewed with increased suspicion and fear by the secular world around them. The evangelical agenda is increasingly viewed as a reactionary militant foe to the pluralism and individual freedom championed in the modern world. The term “fundamentalist” is applied pejoratively to everything from Islamic revolutionaries holding American citizens against their will, to Mormon polygamist sects hiding out in the fringes of American society. Evangelicals who attempt to stem the rising tide of secularism in society and who take a public stand against evil, are simply dismissed as fundamentalists who are not concerned about the differing moral values of others, but only with repressing out of fear the new found freedom experienced by Americans, finally liberated from the shackles of Puritan and Victorian legalism.

But as this essay will argue, there are some indications that American evangelicalism actually may be more hostile to secular America than secular America is to American evangelicalism. And it is this hostility and fear that perpetuates this uneasy tension, and which in effect, cuts off many opportunities for fruitful dialogue with a society that is searching for, and needing, honest answers to the hard questions of life. This point I think can be demonstrated by a general analysis of the massive evangelical subculture and a more detailed review of one aspect of that subculture, popular Christian literature.

I am convinced that one very important and often overlooked place to take the pulse of modern American evangelicalism, is to periodically scan the Christian Bookseller’s “best sellers” list. These are published on a monthly basis in several trade publications, including *Christian Retailing* and *Bookstore Journal*. The type of books that evangelicals buy, even if not indicative of what evangelicals actually read, is a very good barometer of where the evangelical’s heart and treasure really lie. What books people buy, I think, reflects what people think, what generally interests them and gives a strong clue about how they feel about the world around them.

The Doctrine of Creation

One theme that constantly emerges from popular evangelical literature as a kind of unifying factor is an unhealthy and unbiblical fear of the world. This fear of the world in turn, produces a peculiar distrust and marked hostility toward the surrounding culture that much of evangelicalism sincerely desires to win to Christ. There is a noticeable paranoia which has infected much of the American church since the relative abandonment of the classical Protestant doctrine of creation.

In this historic Protestant understanding, the world, which was seen to be created as “very good” by God, and even as fallen, is still intended to serve as the place where God works out the redemption of his people. This high view of creation, and the role given God’s world as the theater of redemption, has been replaced by a doctrine of creation that is more classically Greek and neo-Platonic than biblical, and which denies the essential goodness of the world, seeing creation as incidental to God’s ultimate purpose, the redemption of the spiritual.

We do not know if we are to fear what we can even see, touch or taste, and each author or authority who tackles this vague enemy simply postulates his or her own diagnosis as to the true identity and the cure for the real enemy that they alone have found. We merely know that the enemy is “out there,” that it is evil, and more importantly, that it is associated with the world in some way, shape or form.

You might think that this inability to define our enemy might produce a paralysis of sorts. But instead, it has given rise to a mass number of books and ministries each claiming to have identified for us just exactly who this enemy is, and that their own particular solution to the problem is in fact, the answer that everyone else has missed. This produces a great deal of confusion because what has resulted is hydra of individuals and para-church ministries who perpetuate this uneasiness, each one calling to attention many the different forms and nuances of the enemy and his (or her, as the case may be) influence. The simplified progression works as follows – More enemies, more theories, more theories, more books, more books, more sales. What you see on the shelves in your local Christian bookstore is perhaps more result of corporate marketing strategies, slick advertising packages and the promise of “trust me, it will sell,” rather than upon serious theological reflection by the publisher, their salesmen or the store buyers who are all honestly struggling to earn an honorable living.

The Growth of the Evangelical Subculture

Another factor which demonstrates the depth of the uneasy relationship between evangelicals and the surrounding culture, is the huge growth of the massive evangelical subculture. Since worldly amusements are out, we have Christian music, Christian television, Christian radio and evangelistic films. We can put catchy biblical motifs on spandex pants and proclaim the glories of Christ instead of doing Satan’s bidding! Since we cannot tolerate senseless violence, the current wrestling craze is clearly taboo, but is very nicely replaced by a Christian equivalent, the Power Team. And while no truly God-fearing person would have the least bit of interest in horror films and suspenseful science fiction, conscientious Christians should never be seen reading a Steven King novel. Instead, evangelical readers are provided with an excellent alternative, the fiction of Frank Peretti, and the enthralling tales of supernatural warfare among angels and demons in the mythical city of Ashton. The unknown god, popularly called the “higher power” of Alcoholics Anonymous, is far too secular for us, so we have Christian twelve-step programs, recovery books and journals, all designed, we are assured, to present a Biblical alternative to these secular programs.

What may also come as quite a surprise to many, is just how large this massive evangelical sub-culture and the massive Christian retailing industry that underlies it has become. While exact figures are hard to come by, one report puts the sales of all items in Christian bookstores at \$2.7 billion for 1990 alone, and that sales of Christian books nationwide in all stores totaled over \$1.5 billion in 1989. By all accounts this is a massive industry, and an industry that grows by leaps and bounds every year. We are selling more books, more Bibles, more tapes and CD's than ever before, and all the while, our beloved America becomes increasingly more secularized. This is borne out by rather distressing statistical evidence that indicates that only 25% of Christians who regularly attend church, actually shop in local Christian bookstores. What is most shocking about this is that this one quarter of the Christian population manages to purchase 90% of all merchandise sold, a figure that would amount to over 2.4 billion dollars annually.¹

The amazing paradox in all of this is that the more Christians fear the world, the more they end up actually imitating and even perpetuating the very worldliness that terrifies them. Christian alternative entertainment is often a mere mimicking of pagan culture. The basic philosophical questions about what media can be used to communicate the gospel and how each media effects the message it communicates, simply are not asked. Because we are so prone to uncritically copy the various forms of media already found in the culture, whether it be a particular style of music, or a popular form of entertainment such as rock concerts or television talk shows, we may find ourselves baptizing with Bible verses forms of culture that are intrinsically anti-Christian, or forms that tend to obscure the Gospel. Even worse, we may take legitimate and God-honoring forms of media and misuse them by turning them into mere Christian propaganda. By “denying the world,” and offering alternative entertainment, we find that “we are of the world but not in the world”--a rather lamentable and unbiblical situation. We are “of the world” because we are content to copy its various cultural products and yet we are obviously not “in the world” because we are selling 90% of the cultural products that we do produce to ourselves.²

There are several major turning points in the recent history of Christian publishing that serve to illustrate the type of uneasiness and paranoia that I'm talking about.

Doomsday Predictions

If you were asked to name the number one best-selling book in America during the 1970's, I'm sure that you would not mention Hal Lindsey's *The Late Great Planet Earth*, published in 1970. But in fact, this sensational end-times account was the best-selling book in America during the tumultuous seventies, selling over ten million copies to date and going through one hundred and forty printings. While *The Late Great Planet Earth* reflects the very popular dispensational premillennial approach to end-times, I would argue that its amazing success lies not so much in its eschatological perspective, as in the timing of its release, proving the adage that “timing is everything.”

In the seventies, America stood on the brink of war at varying times, with both the Soviet Union and the

¹ Philip Gold, “Getting the Word to a Mass Market,” *Insight*, Vol. 6, No. 51 (December 17, 1990), 42.

² See Kenneth A. Myers' excellent critique of popular culture in *All God's Children and Blue Suede Shoes: Christians & Popular Culture* (Westchester: Crossway Books, 1989).

People's Republic of China. The evening news carried sensational and gut-wrenching new film of the previous day's carnage of the best of American youth in the jungles of Vietnam. The Six-Day War in 1967 had already rallied public support and interest in the fledgling nation of Israel through what was truly a great military miracle. It was David and Goliath all over again, only this time on television in our own living rooms. The Yom Kippur War of 1973, while pushing the superpowers to the brink of war, only enhanced favorable opinions of Israel's cause already formed earlier.

But international crises were not the only elements at work. In November of 1963, we watched our young president brutally murdered in Dallas. At the close of the sixties (1968), Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King were both tragically assassinated at what seemed to be the brink of an important turning point in American history. Who can forget the near anarchy that took place at that year's Democratic convention in Chicago? The whole world was watching. Lyndon Johnson's promised "Great Society" never did materialize and instead we watched as many of our biggest inner cities burned with race rioting induced by bigoted hatred and ethnic violence. And what was any more traumatic for patriotic Americans than to watch President Nixon resigning in disgrace, again on live national television, due to the rapidly hemorrhaging Watergate scandal.

It was in the midst of our loss of innocence and well after the end of the post World War II optimism that *The Late Great Planet Earth* burst onto the scene. People were desperately seeking answers. What would the future hold? Would there be nuclear war? What would happen to America, Israel and the Soviet Union in the future? What would God do in the midst of this? What would happen to Christians, who already had good Biblical reason to be less than optimistic about the future of the world? *The Late Great Planet Earth* had the answers from God's word, something secular prophets like Jeanne Dixon could never muster.

What answers did Hal Lindsey offer the church in the midst of such a fearful future?—quite simple ones actually. If you are a Christian, you will not be here to experience any of the horrible things that are going to happen upon the earth. Christ is going to return, secretly, and remove all believers from the earth before the beginning of the Great Tribulation, which would see, among other things, the Soviet Union invade Israel and lose, the rise of a ten-nation confederacy as a type of Roman empire redivivus in the resulting power vacuum created by the absence of Christians and the demise of the Soviet Union, and which would in turn give rise to the Anti-Christ as its God-hating ruler. All of this would be done after Christ had removed his church, giving Christians the wonderful hope of escaping the great and horrible consequences yet to come.

No single Christian book has ever created the excitement or relevance to current events as did *The Late Great Planet Earth*. Here, in a popular form, were all of the answers to the great turmoil that America was experiencing. At last, we had something that could help us make sense of the horrors and uncertainties we were watching on our television sets each evening. But while *The Late Great Planet Earth* popularized a common scenario of end-times events and gave birth to a new genre of "Bible prophecy" books. On its heels followed sequel after sequel, and whole para-church ministries devoted to end-times events and teachings burst upon the scene. End times and Bible prophecy books became one of the most popular and influential forces in Christendom. In fact, it may be argued that the evangelical subculture was given birth largely as a result of the prophecy craze. The Jesus-people movement was heavily based upon and influenced by this literature. Prophecy seminars and sensational low-budget films about Christ's return were used as evangelistic tools. The end of the world was coming and we had all of the answers.

The end-times scenario, popularized by Hal Lindsey and others, is one which perpetuates a dislike and a fear of the world. Since the church is not going to be around after the “Rapture,” and the Rapture will take place at any moment, what happens to the church’s role in the world, society and culture around it? Since human government is nothing more than a vehicle for the rise of anti-Christ, its perhaps best if we not get involved. The world itself will be savaged by nuclear war and horrible plagues and upheaval, and therefore, what place does ecological stewardship now occupy? *The Late Great Planet Earth*, and the mass of Bible prophecy books that it spawned, are clearly indicative of the uneasy and fearful relationship that American evangelicals have with the world around them.

It is argued, however, that these books effectively promote the gospel. They give incentive for people to turn to Jesus Christ in an uncertain time. It may be that this is exactly where this genre of books have their most unfortunate side effect. It seems that every time there is some geo-political crisis anywhere in the world, a whole batch of these books burst forth onto the scene. The Desert Storm conflict revived our long-entrenched interest in the Middle East. Coupled with Saddam Hussein’s despotic desire to rebuild ancient Babylon, some publishers rapidly brought out a whole new generation of such books linking these events to the end times. Actually, the best-selling book on the recent crisis is John Walvoord’s *Armageddon, Oil and The Middle East Crisis*. *Christian Retailing*, in the list for April 1991, lists this title as the number one best-seller, followed by another book on the same subject, *The Rise of Babylon*, by Charles Dyer, which is not even a new book, but was originally published in 1974. Reprinted and revised with the impending crisis looming on the horizon, it now sports a snazzy “Desert Storm” motif complete with updated art work, depicting the newest armored and aerial combatants on the front cover. I marvel how each time a new geopolitical crisis occurs anywhere with the world, the evangelical publishing enterprise can rise to the occasion with amazing speed. But that gets at the heart of the problem, doesn’t it—we leap before we look. By the time many stores got all of their Desert Storm product on the shelves, the one-hundred hour ground war was mercifully over. Israel was kept from the crisis, as was the Soviet Union. Prophecy pundits were forced to rewrite and re-think their various scenarios now that things didn’t turn out as envisaged. And that is the point. The Scriptures warn us quite clearly about such speculation. Our Lord himself warned us that no man knows the day or the hour of his return, except the Father in heaven (Matt 24:36). One recent book goes so far as to argue that Jesus is telling us the exact opposite, that we can know the day and the hour. This is distributed by the same prophetic ministry that produced the now infamous *88 Reasons Why The Rapture Will Be in 1988*, by Edgar Whisenant. Peter tells us that one of the characteristics of the last days will be that scoffers will come, saying “Where is this coming he promised” (II Peter 3:3-4)? Unfortunately, we have given those who will scoff a great deal of new ammunition. The watching unbelieving world around us picks up on “this world this not my home—it’s all going to burn” attitude and the consequence that we have helped to create, is the scoffing and contempt that those around us have for Christ, his church and his people predicted by Peter. We have cried wolf too many times for secular America to take us seriously anymore.

Yes, Jesus is coming back soon. But will they even listen to us anymore? It appears to non-Christians who watch us that we have our own quite selfish agenda and that we really don’t care about those outside the club or the very world that we share in common with those who may disagree with us. This is an unfortunate and unbiblical legacy.

There was a time Christians were characterized as a loving, charitable, hardworking people, who did as Paul instructed those who were confused about the end (I Thess. 4:11-12). They worked with their hands, they lived a quiet life, minded their own business and were at peace with their neighbors, all the time winning respect for the gospel by their quiet, though productive lifestyles. Sadly, those days are over. We have become so preoccupied with escaping from the world in many quarters, that we no longer are

effectively communicating to non-Christians that we care for, and are eager to help those less fortunate than ourselves—because Jesus Christ is coming back. We have sent a very much misunderstood message of hostility to our culture.

Conspiracy Theories

A major plot for Christian conspiracies came during the late seventies with the secular humanist scare. It was those dreaded secular humanists who took such things as prayer out of our schools. These enemies of the faith foisted evolutionary teaching on our children. The humanists are behind the immorality that is rampantly sweeping across America. They champion pornography, adultery, and sex education in our schools. Sound familiar? Christians of an earlier era, undergirded by the doctrine of total depravity and original sin, would have attributed immorality to the character of every fallen human being, including Christians themselves. But the new theorists are convinced that Americans are basically good people who have had their institutions stolen from them by a significant minority of intellectuals, artists, and members of the media. Some conspiracy theories even went to so far as to allude that our major network news anchors were all conspirators in a plot to promote un-Christian attitudes and perspectives in the general public to prepare the way for the rise of anti-Christ. And while all Christians lament the current state of the churches' witness and influence in our culture, are we really to believe that the predicament we are in is due to a satanic conspiracy, rather than to a more painful cause, the churches' lack of involvement in culture, including the arts, the media and the sciences?

We lost ground by default rather than by a satanic conspiracy. But let's face it, conspiracy theories shift the blame for the moral decline of our country from ourselves to our mysterious enemies, Satan, demons and the world. We left the world by no longer participating in the culture, and paganism and unbelief simply rushed in and filled in the void.

The effects of the conspiracy theories and these distinctly American slants upon things, and the way in which they are involved in the redefinition of doctrine is perhaps best illustrated by Dave Hunt's best-seller, *The Seduction of Christianity*. Dave Hunt did a good service for the Christian church, in what amounted to a tremendous act of personal courage. He took some very popular and successful ministries and ministers to task for some very unorthodox teaching. The problem, however, with much of Dave Hunt's work, including *The Seduction of Christianity*, is that woven throughout his research into these various doctrinal errors, is this re-occurring satanic conspiracy motif. This only serves to detract the reader looking for a serious theological critique from the overall research and general impact of the book. Since Hunt is deeply influenced by an eschatology similar to that of Hal Lindsey, there is an unfortunate tendency for Mr. Hunt to respond to those he opposes with a sensationalist flair. This is what Americans have come to want and to expect. You get the feeling by reading the book, that lying under every psychiatrist's couch are a legion of demons ready to pounce on any unsuspecting person needing therapy. Here again, we find an almost irrational fear and overt hostility toward several very legitimate disciplines.

This attitude of hostility toward the world only perpetuates the evangelical paranoia to a greater degree. Could this be one reason why Hunt's *Seduction* was a best-seller, and why Francis Schaeffer's work never attained such a status? Polemics of the previous generations, such as J. Gresham Machen's excellent *Christianity and Liberalism*, were characterized by clear headedness and sober scholarship. Machen was warning the church in the thirties of what is now known as Protestant liberalism. Machen's

book is now dated, of course, but there is nothing in the book that would embarrass Machen should he come back and read the manuscript today. Machen could have easily tied the theology of mainline Protestantism to an end-times apostasy. But he didn't. For Machen, the matter was a question of orthodoxy and the need to respond when orthodoxy was abandoned. For Dave Hunt, with the prophetic-conspiracy theory angle, the unifying factor underlying *Seduction* is the impending end of the world, and the satanic conspiracy which will usher the end. Therefore, the thrust of the book turns from one of a sober examination of serious doctrinal errors to one of sensationalism. After all, writes Hunt, could not these doctrinal aberrations really be harbingers of the end? Isn't Satan the one behind all of this?

The irony in all of this is that the more we attempt to warn people of these possible satanic conspiracies, the more we end up giving our arch-foe exactly what he wants, lots of free publicity. Is it possible that we are helping to create an unnatural interest in the occult? Watch Christian television for an hour or two and count how many times you hear the word "Satan" verses the number of times you hear the words "God," or "Jesus." There is a fine line between love and hate. Both are an obsession.

Spiritual Warfare

The huge popularity of Frank Peretti's *This Present Darkness*, and its sequel *Piercing the Darkness*, also reveals this sense of uneasiness and fear of the world in what I think is a disturbing trend. While Peretti endeavored to produce a fictional account of the supernatural warfare revealed in the Scriptures, many Christians, who often lack even the most basic theological and Biblical training, have ended up reading Peretti's fiction as though it were systematic theology. Because the intended audience is sometimes ill-informed about the purpose of the genre of fiction and the reasons for telling a compelling story simply on its own merits, many reading Peretti's fictional account of spiritual warfare possess little ability to discern between his riveting fantasy and the Biblical doctrines which he had hoped to illumine. People have in many cases, actually redefined their views of the supernatural based upon a fictional novel, instead of developing a biblical view of the supernatural and then interacting with fictional literature.

The result of the success of Peretti's book is that a whole host of similar books have followed in its wake, many of these less than sound in content. Cumulatively, this has produced a whole new generation of Christians who now see the world through a supernatural grid that has more in common with Greek and Persian mystery religions than with Christianity. Since many Christians no longer see the world around them as Protestants historically have done, through the doctrines of creation, the fall of humanity in Adam, and redemption of the world in Christ, there is no doctrine of original sin left, from which to form the category by which to make sense out of human suffering and the reality of evil in the world. This new model of spiritual warfare, taught to many through the pages of novels like *This Present Darkness*, has led some to assume that evil and suffering are the immediate result of this invisible cosmic struggle between angels and the demonic forces of the prince of darkness. The problem is not with the inherent sinfulness residing within the shadowy darkness of the human heart and the resulting rebellion against God and his word. Instead the problem is with someone or something else—the demonic. There is suffering and evil in the world because of satan and demons, not because I too, along with all of my fellow human beings, are guilty with Adam for rebelling against God.

Instead of seeing the world as portrayed in the creation account, as "very good," in this model the world is viewed as merely incidental to the ultimate reality, and what really matters—the spiritual world. The world is the arena of combat where the ultimate reality is taking place. For ultimate reality is now to be

found in another dimension, as invisible legions of angels and demons engage in heated battle, and wherein evil and suffering on the earth results from the residual fallout caused by these angelic forces as they manipulate human pawns as tools in their struggle for power. Spiritual warfare is where the action is now!

Those who see reality exclusively through the lens of warfare between angels and demons will inevitably read the turmoils of life as proof of a struggle between these spiritual combatants. People are now looking for answers to the great questions of life in an another, "spiritual" dimension. Yet many evangelicals are teaching that we should be looking for demons and evil spirits as the sole explanation for any given situation we may encounter. We are being told that if we want to be victorious Christians then all we have to do is to exercise the proper dominion—and inevitably, the proper technique—over these demons to liberate ourselves and our society. Christians who follow this line of thought often develop a tendency to become hostile and fearful of the world, because after all, demons may be lurking behind every crisis, whether it be physical or emotional.

Christians are buying spiritual warfare books almost as fast as they can be written. And what message does this send to a watching and unbelieving world that is more open to sound answers than ever before? The message that we are sending back to them is that they are but stooges of the devil.

Conclusion

From my reading of Scripture, the best method of binding Satan is still the preaching of the gospel (Lk 10:18; Rev. 20:1-3). And while no one who takes the Scriptures seriously can deny the reality of the demonic, there can be little doubt that the great interest in these type of books reveals how uneasy evangelicals are about the world around them. This is clearly demonstrated by the fact that there are now more best-selling books about “spiritual warfare,” and related themes, than there ever were about the central figure of the Bible—Jesus Christ. It is interesting to note that the fictional classics by C. S. Lewis, *Chronicles of Narnia*, and the *Space Trilogy* have not to my knowledge, seen any increase in sales, as they do not reflect this uneasiness with the world around us. The one Lewis book that has experienced a renaissance of sorts is *The Screwtape Letters*, which is Lewis’ account of a senior devil giving instructions in deception to a junior devil. It seems that the type of fiction, particularly fiction oriented toward spiritual or occultic themes, contributes more to present popularity of such books rather than a general revival of the genre itself. Certainly Frank Peretti is not to blame for the current preoccupation with the spiritual world. All that he did was produce a first rate novel. But there can be no doubt that the success of *This Present Darkness*, and the rise of a whole genre of spiritual warfare novels betrays a bigger problem.

Evangelicals are at war with modern culture, and the tactics of this warfare have not been thought through. If the best way to bind Satan is to preach the gospel, and if Satan and his underlings are the cause of everything from urban violence to paper cuts, then maybe we should consider missionary work. If the world is really going to end next week, maybe we should step out of our evangelical ghettos for a day or two and share Christ with the pagans in a way that is both relevant and meaningful. If the militant secular humanists really have taken over our institutions, maybe we should act as the first century Christians did to their surrounding secular humanist culture (i.e., preach the gospel and let it transform the culture in time). But instead, we have retreated from the world. It was the apostle Paul, however, who said, “What business is it of mine to judge those outside the church? . . . God will judge those outside.”

Judgment will come in due time to all those who are not in Christ. This hour, however, is reserved not for judgment, but for the planting of choice wheat. We must stop pointing the finger at the tares, as if they were the cause of all our problems, and we must sit still, and call this world our home, for the time being.

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