

# The Waco Tragedy

## Painful Questions

by Gary Patterson

Until the morning of March 1, 1993, most Seventh-day Adventists had never heard of a Waco, Texas, religious group whose members called themselves the Branch Davidians. But following the shoot-out with federal agents the day before and the ensuing heavy media coverage—which connected the group with our church—we became painfully aware that distant connections are not clearly distinguished in short news reports.

It is true that David Koresh as well as Victor Houteff, the founder of the Shepherd's Rod in 1930, were for a short period of time members of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. However, both were found to be extreme in their religious views, espousing beliefs and practices unacceptable to our church. Houteff was dropped from the membership of a Los Angeles-area Adventist congregation in 1929, and Koresh—who was baptized in the Tyler, Texas, church in 1979—was disfellowshipped two years later, in 1981.

As the story developed in the media, the initial connections with our church rapidly began to fade. This was the result of both the diligent work of General Conference communications personnel and the

realization by news reporters that the beliefs and practices of the Branch Davidians did not reflect what they knew of the Seventh-day Adventist Church nor, for that matter, any other mainline Christian church.

Koresh was leading a religious group that had moved several mutations away from Houteff's original Shepherd's Rod movement. After being disfellowshipped in 1929, Houteff had developed his own belief system and organizational structure apart from the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

Following a long succession of internal struggles and splinters in the Shepherd's Rod, Koresh emerged decades later as the leader of a small group that believed in defending their views to the point of an armed conflict. They saw themselves playing a leading role in a bizarre scenario of end-time events.

It is likewise true that many of the Branch Davidians did at one time have connections with the Seventh-day Adventist Church, yet their belief system and organization were never connected with ours.

Koresh's blasphemous claims to Messiahship as the Son of God and the reincarnation of Jesus Christ, as well as his position of claiming all women in the compound as his wives with the sole authority to procreate, placed him far beyond biblical principles and Seventh-day Adventist doctrines, let alone rational thought processes.

After weeks of contacts and negotiations, the federal agents decided to break the

standoff. Their intervention was followed by a horrifying fire that rapidly consumed the compound and those who had remained in it. The strange story then shifted to the office of the U.S. attorney general, various federal agencies, and the courts.

Beyond the tragic loss of life, particularly of innocent children, one is left with sobering reflections and questions.

Clearly we have learned that as a church we must be prepared for unexpected, critical events. When they occur, it is too late to get ready. The General Conference and the North American Division established a crisis management team shortly after the Waco events began to make headlines. But we would have been greatly advantaged had we had a team that needed only to be activated. Such should exist at all levels of our church organization.

More seriously, we must ask ourselves, What makes apparently rational people vulnerable to such madness? And even more distressing, Is there anything in our religious life and ministry that attracts or predisposes extremists in the church? What should we do as a community of Bible-believing Christians to protect members from being deceived by such groups and leaders?

If we will address these issues, perhaps next time we will be better prepared to deal with a crisis—and there will be a next time.

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## A Remnant Out of Control

by Marvin Moore

In 1982 the Texas Conference invited me to be the pastor of the Seventh-day Adventist church in Waco, Texas. Given the history of the church's problems with

the Shepherd's Rod, I accepted with some misgivings. Fortunately, my relationship with these people was generally cordial. The few problems I did have, including one encounter with Vernon Howell (David Koresh), I was able to resolve in a non confrontational manner.

The tragic events of early 1993 make it very clear, however, that the problems inherent in this group were present back in 1982. In the aftermath of recent events, I have asked myself, What is there about this group that attracted some Adventists to take up their cause? What danger signals can we

watch for in any group that will alert us to be cautious about "joining up"?

I believe that the foundation of the problem with the Shepherd's Rod, which splintered and evolved into the Branch Davidians, is the Adventist remnant concept carried to a fanatical extreme. As Seventh-day Adventists we believe God called us to a special task. This is a biblical concept. God called Israel to be His peculiar people. Noah, Elijah, John the Baptist, and the earliest disciples each were called to undertake a unique mission. Indeed, Jesus called every Christian to be a

witness for Him to the end of the age (see Matthew 28:19, 20).

Thus it should come as no surprise that in earth's final days God should call an individual or a people to proclaim a special message for Him. We believe that the Seventh-day Adventist movement was raised by God for that purpose.

Unfortunately, one of the greatest temptations for anyone who has received a special call from God is to turn that call to selfish purposes. The Jews, for example, persuaded themselves that they were the only ones God loved, and they shunned the very Gentiles God intended that they should serve.

The Shepherd's Rod has a long history of considering themselves to be a remnant, called by God to purify the Seventh-day Adventist Church. We all recognize, of course, that there is room for improvement in our church. Perhaps someday God will raise up someone to lead out in such a work. Unfortunately, for every reformer God may choose to raise up, a score of would-be reformers appoint themselves.

What causes some Adventists to follow false reformers? I believe that our teaching

about a perfect remnant makes us particularly susceptible.

Victor Houteff sounded this note 60 years ago. His first publication stated the primary objective of his movement to be "the 144,000 and a call for reformation" (see *SDA Encyclopedia*, p. 376, ed. 1976). Since that time Shepherd's Rod adherents have made no secret of the fact that they felt called to purify the church, by killing Adventists if necessary.

Though far less radical, a number of groups exist on the fringes of our church today that have the primary motive of purifying it. I do not wish to lessen the importance of holy living. However, we should be wary of any person or organization that emphasizes perfection to the exclusion of the church's broader mission, which is to reach unsaved people for Christ.

For more than 100 years Adventists have taught that God's people must be perfect in order to live without a Mediator after the close of probation (see *The Great Controversy*, pp. 425, 623). Unfortunately, this is one of the most easily abused of our teachings. An obsession with it almost

invariably leads to rigid legalism, unhealthy introspection, and a focus on self rather than on Christ and His acceptance of us where we are now.

I believe that God raised up the Adventist Church to be His "John the Baptists" in the world today. John called people to repentance from sin, and so must we. And true reform always leads to unity, not schism. Years ago Ellen White warned about those who would bring disunity in the church. "If they could draw aside the curtain veiling the future and see the result of their disunion," she said, "they would surely be led to repent" (*Counsels for the Church*, p. 43; *Testimonies for the Church*, Vol. 8, p. 240). The tragic final days of the Branch Davidians give us a chance to draw that curtain aside and reflect on 60 years of a remnant out of control.

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## Between Truth and Error

by George W. Reid

What appears remarkable to us is the way David Koresh could so captivate his followers that they remained loyal even to death. The civil authorities too misread this factor, judging such devotion to be beyond reason, therefore likely to crumble.

But in fact there is compelling power in obsession, no matter what its point of focus. History records countless abortive efforts to rebuild life along ideological lines, whether religious, political, philosophical, or social. Among sociologists a veritable industry has grown up in analyzing intentional communities. The same force that drives the religious monastic ideal resurfaces in economic egalitarian communities and politics as well.

Does the solution lie in avoiding commitment? Not necessarily. The test lies in making certain that what lies at the center of one's life is sound. What was faulty among Branch Davidians was not

their devotion but its object. A world programmed to reject absolutes and committed to the nonjudgmental ideal is unprepared to cope with events such as those at Waco. Jesus warned against judging people's inner motives but nowhere suggested we should not discern between right and wrong.

How can we build a solid center while protecting ourselves from deception? The task is not simple, but a few suggestions can help.

Excess focus on one or two issues should sound an alarm. God paints in broad strokes, assembling a worldview that engages every aspect of life.

To be sure, there are special truths that need particular emphasis at given times. These "present truths" lead to reform, but never end in themselves. Their purpose is to restore wholeness in God's interaction with people. Excess concentration on an issue narrows us, and can sectarianize us. Koresh narrowed his followers with a sense of crisis built on coming events. Concern with final events is legitimate, but not if severed from the larger body of Christ's truth. The center of gravity at Waco rolled into an unwieldy position, and the result was disaster.

How does this speak to us Adventists with our excitement about Christ's soon return? It reminds us that prophecies are

ports of entry to a growing walk with God. They are never ends in themselves. As Jesus put it: "And it is they that bear witness to me" (John 5:39, RSV).

Truth will bear the test of integrity. This is not to say reason judges revelation, but to note the two are not in conflict. Real truth harmonizes with the standard set by the Scriptures.

Because David Koresh's doctrine extended well beyond what could be substantiated from the Bible, he soon laid claim to the prophetic gift. When his revelations led to claims of Deity, accumulation of arms, and adultery, this should have sent a definitive signal to all around him. Clear teachings of God's Word were being contradicted.

But by that time the obsession was deeply entrenched, and a loyalty that belongs only to God had transferred to a man. The end tragedy came not from excess dedication to the message of God, but from devotion to something in direct conflict with God's Word. What is at the center really does make the difference.

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