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Lessons Learned from a Church Shooting

By Tim Haile

In a Sunday worship service of the West Freeway Church of Christ in White Settlement, TX (December 29, 2019), a visitor removed a shotgun from beneath the long coat that he was wearing and proceeded to shoot worshippers, killing two. Thankfully, the shooting spree was short-lived due to the heroic actions of some volunteer security guards. Particular credit goes to 71 year-old Jack Wilson who fired one shot that quickly ended what might have otherwise been a blood bath. Thanks to Wilson's training, ability and willingness to risk involvement, many lives were likely saved.

We regret the unnecessary and tragic loss of life and our hearts go out to the family members and friends of the deceased men. I hope that none will view the timing of my article as crass or inconsiderate, but some important lessons can be learned from this incident that might potentially help others in dealing with similar situations.

The Entitlement Mentality Exists, and It Can Become Deadly.

The murderer (Keith Kinnunen) had visited the church on prior occasions and requested cash but was given food. He became increasingly angry because he was not given cash. While we don't yet know a specific motive in this case we do know that the perpetrator was mad at the church for not giving him the money that he wanted. Many of us have personally witnessed people react in this very way. Thankfully, most cases do not result in murder or other violence.

The Bible teaches that people should work for their livelihood. Paul told the Thessalonians, "Make it your ambition to lead a quiet life: You should mind your own business and work with your hands, just as we told you, so that your daily life may win the respect of outsiders and so that you will not be dependent on anybody" (1 Thessalonians 4:11-12). The entitlement mentality ignores this personal responsibility and simply expects others to do for them what they refuse to do for themselves. Combined with a lack of respect for the lives and property of other people, this mentality can have violent and even fatal consequences. People with such attitudes must be watched carefully.

Love For Others Does Not Preclude The Need for Caution.

Religious people are aware of the Lord's command to "love your neighbor as yourself" (Matthew 22:39; Romans 13:9). We also know that this love "believes all things" (or "trusts always," 1 Corinthians 13:7), meaning that it does not automatically assume evil of others or impugn their motives. However, neither should love be naive. We are to evaluate people based upon their words and behavior (the "fruits" of Matthew 7:16). Solomon said, "The prudent sees danger and hides himself, but the simple (naive) go and suffer for it" (Proverbs 22:3; 27:12). "The naive believe everything, but the simple man considers his steps" (Proverbs 14:15). Loving others does not eliminate the need for scrutiny and caution. Paul solicited prayers from others "that the word of the Lord might have free course" and that he and others might be "delivered from unreasonable and wicked men," for, as he went on to say, "not all have faith" (2 Thessalonians 3:1-2). The reality is that some people are wicked and they have wicked intent towards others.

In one of the reports that I read on the West Freeway church of Christ shooting, a woman said

that she noticed that there was something strange about the man - that he appeared to be wearing a wig and a fake beard and was wearing a hat and a long coat and behaving strangely. Such oddities in appearance and behavior need to be taken seriously and no principle of love is violated by exercising such caution and taking protective or preventative action.

People Have The God-given Right To Protect Themselves And Others:

Liberals and Bible novices and errorists have challenged the actions of the West Freeway church and their security team (and particularly Jack Wilson) in taking action to neutralize the shooter. Liberal politicians like Joe Biden and others have scoffed at the notion of churches allowing (trained and responsible) members to carry guns in services. Some have gone so far as to make a moral equivalency between what the murderer (Keith Kinnunen) did and what the hero (Jack Wilson) did. This is both foolish and dangerous.

The Bible repeatedly makes a distinction between "murder" and justified "killing." Murder is the unlawful taking of innocent life and results in "bloodguilt" on the part of the murderer for the innocent blood that he shed. Killing that is done in the protection of others or in the punishment of murderers does not involve bloodguilt. Genesis 9:6 says, "Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in His own image." Exodus 21:12 says, "Whoever strikes a man so that he dies shall be put to death." These short verses, one during the Patriarchal period and the other during the Mosaical, speak of two killings, but one is condemned and the other one is justified. One is not authorized by God and the other one is authorized.

The Law of Moses provides us with a scenario which explains this distinction. Exodus 22:2 says, "If a thief is found breaking in and is struck so that he dies, there shall be no bloodguilt for him." We would now call this a "home invasion." The homeowner is exempt from guilt even if he kills the intruder. Jesus alluded to this scenario in Matthew 24:43 when He used it to illustrate the surprise timing of His final coming. He said, "that if the master of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into." In other words, he would have taken preventative measures against the home invader.

The New Testament also authorizes killing in the protection of innocent lives and the punishment of evildoers (Romans 13:3-4; Acts 25:11). In fact, Paul taught that a "believer" behaves more like an "unbeliever" who refuses to provide protection for his family (1 Timothy 5:8). For more help on this subject see my article on the Bible and Self Defense.

The Power Of Self-Sacrifice:

One of the victims in the West Freeway church shooting was a man named Richard White. He was one of the volunteer security team members. He volunteered for a role that placed him at the forefront of a dangerous situation and it cost him his life. We often think of (and thank) professional law enforcement and military personnel for putting themselves at risk and too often, paying the ultimate price for their work. However, Richard White was no paid professional. He was just a man who was willing to help others in a potentially costly way. He deserves to be honored for his bravery and self-sacrifice.

The Bible has a lot to say about sacrifice. Paul argued that we are "compelled" by Christ's sacrifice for us (2 Corinthians 5:14). There is something endearing about sacrifice. While no human sacrifice can compare to the spiritual and redemptive aspect and power of Christ's sacrifice, there is nonetheless a natural sense of appreciation for sacrifice, even when made by a mere human in his effort to serve others. Paul acknowledged this principle in Romans 5:6-8: "For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will scarcely die

for a righteous person-though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die- but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us."

The real point of this text is the willingness of God's own Son to die for all - and not for "good" people, but for ungodly and unworthy people. A side point of the text is the general principle of sacrifice for others. It is good and right for us to appreciate the sacrifices that some make in serving others. We must accept the sad reality that there are people around us who behave more like animals than humans. Peter described them as being like "natural born beasts, made to be taken and destroyed" (2 Peter 2:12). Kinnunen had a record of assaulting and harming other people. His murderous actions resulted in a fate that was justified - his death. As for his spiritual fate; He alone is responsible. His murderous actions forced others to do what they did in taking his life. They are not to be blamed for the judgment that follows.

Editor's Note: It is a sad commentary on our times that there would be a need for such an article as the one herein reproduced. Some of us remember when the very idea of a person entering a meeting house designed for worship with a gun and begin shooting those in attendance! Some of us remember when the school day began with a reading from the Bible, followed by prayer and the pledge of allegiance. But under the pretense of the separation of church and state, God and the Bible have been largely divorced from our educational system, and Secular Humanism has been forced in, greatly affecting what is included in the curriculum. Consequently, so many have graduated from school believing in Darwinian Evolution, and not believing in the Bible, or in the God of the Bible. Read Romans 1:20-32 and see what happens when a society tries to reason God out of existence! Let us, as parents and as a local congregation, do more to instill faith in our precious youth.