Portait of Betrayal

by Michael Bray

De Tocqueville's alacritous 19th century account of American society draws the affections of Christian Patriots. In an age of license and decadence, his account of public civility and community spirit is attractive. In our time of convoluted "pluralism" (read: polytheism), his commendation of the explicitly Christian foundations of American society provides refreshing hope from our past. "While I was in America," he reports, "a witness who happened to be called at the Sessions (court) of the county of Chester (State of New York) declared that he did not believe in the existence of God or in the immortality of the soul. The judge refused to admit his evidence, on the ground that the witness had destroyed beforehand all the confidence of the court in what he was about to say. The newspapers related the fact without further comment."

What a comforting society! Wish we could get there from here. (And, Lord willing, we shall.) Our system of trial by jury has been virtually undermined by the plea bargain system by which 90% of criminal cases are resolved. Witnesses rarely make it to open court. Their testimony is secured by prosecutors and then used as a tool to extract testimony for conviction of codefendants. The reward for testimony is relief from prosecution entirely, or at least the guarantee of reduced penalty. Admitted into the court in our time is not only the testimony of atheists, but also those which are products of coercion. And routinely, those in a group of conspirators who make the earliest deals get the best ones.

It is still our good fortune that the government does "get its man." I have met few who protest themselves to be innocent. And as long as government pursues and convicts evildoers, and not the righteous, it is easy for us to avert our gaze from the procedure in the interest of expedient disposition of criminal cases. But as righteousness in government evaporates and the clouds of status rule gather, rain will fall upon the torch of freedom. Christians will be prosecuted and imprisoned for righteousness' sake.

On June 20, 1988, Reverend Dorman Owens of San Diego was sentenced to 21 months in prison followed by 5 years of probation, during which time he is forbidden to go near a "clinic" or preach on abortion, all stemming from the coerced testimony of a former member of his own flock.

Apparently, plans were made by several members of the Bible Missionary church to blow up "abortion clinics." (Bless their hearts, the members meant well; but one factor which must be figured into the cost of such pro-life strategies is that of silence. When you are threatened with many years of imprisonment apart from testifying against another, the hard but right thing to do is to remain silent.) Dorman Owens, 54, is the pastor of a 400 member church which is well known in the area for its persistent anti-abortion proclamation and picketing. The conviction of Pastor Owens stemmed from a failed attempt to bomb the Alvarado Medical Center on 27 July, 1987. Pastor Owens pleaded guilty, after four months in a noisy, hellish jail, to one count of concealing evidence from federal officials. Only after the government secured the guilty plea was Pastor Owens released from the tortuous jail house on $500,000 bond.

It was the testimony of two Christians which brought Pastor Owens and five other church members to justice. Cathy Saei, 34, was a long time friend of Cheryl Sullenger, one of the female codefendants. She was not a member of the church, but had attended a service and spoken with Pastor Owens. Following an interview with her, the San Diego Union reported that she was "horrified when she first heard of the plans for the bombing." And this horror she deemed too ghastly to tolerate. "She continued to talk to police to prevent it from happening. 'It was a very difficult decision to make (to contact the police),' she said, 'It tore me apart for weeks.' [Yes, and it will tear the lives of others apart for years, Miss Saei.] 'We can get our message across without violence. This has set us back in San Diego. Most people I know in the movement are against violence.'"

(Well now, one gathers that there were many in the underground anti-Nazi movement who were against violence. But there are movement which move things and those which don't. Miss Saei is certainly entitled to labor in whichever way she deems fit. But she would have acted more fairly and decently toward her friends had she excused herself and flocked to those of the NRTL feather. There, she could have clucked on and on with all volubility about the holocaust and how terrible it is. And there she could have had the respect of the press and all good citizens.)

Miss Saei was not content simply to see her friends convicted. The paper goes on to quote her saying, "If they don't do some time, it will send the message that people can get away with it. It's hurting the pro-life movement."

The other Christian whose testimony secured the conviction of Pastor Owens and four church members was that of Eric Svelmoe, 32. But there is cause for sympathy in his case. He was threatened with severe punishment (in terms of prison time) unless he supplied testimony against his friends. And he was told that they might well speak against him anyway once they were indicted. In the likelihood that they would "confess" anyway, he would do himself less harm, and possibly only a little to them, if he would simply tell the agents who did what. "Just tell us the truth, friend. We don't want you to suffer."

Eric Svelmoe had planted a bomb at the clinic, but it did not detonate. Perhaps he was the most zealous and brave (or the most daring and adventuresome). But the heat came down after the deed was done. The flame had been lit by Cathy Saei. Eric was in jail contemplating his fate in an environment of incessant noise (TV, cigarette smoke, radio, foul speech) and the dangers from constant company with miscreants. He sat in misery and vulnerability.

The deed of bomb planting is more complex than it appears to us when viewed through the eyes of a hungry prosecutor. He sees much more imaginatively, having at hand myriad statutes by which to ensnare and club his prey. No, it isn't a simple "attempt to bomb" violation with x units of years of punishment. He sees numerous "counts" of 5 to 10 years each. He sees, for example: 1) conspiracy to destroy property by explosives, 2) conspiracy to produce illegal explosives, 3) possession of illegal explosives, 4) production of illegal explosives. Then, because there were 2 clinics involved, he may choose to creatively double the counts to give an aggregate of about 50 years.

Now, imagine a fine Christian man who knows he must suffer certain pain and indignity for Christ's sake at various times and in assorted ways in his life. He calculates that maybe he will have to spend 10 years in jail on the chance that he gets caught trying to save babies. He may even read the statute. He counts the cost and decides to take the long shot chance on the 10 years. But after sitting in hell for a few months (and without knowledge of the relative comfort of the federal prison into which he would likely be placed following conviction and sentencing), and facing multiple times the number of years expected, his spirit is broken. "Gimme relief!"

Ah yes, the bronco has been tamed and now the prosecutor can harness and make use of him. He will serve to entrap his friends (wonderful drama this makes — Christians delivering up Christians). So Eric pleads guilty to the lone charge of simply planting a bomb. But he must render a little service in exchange for the promise of leniency; he must wear a hidden microphone to tape conversations between himself and his pastor.

Bruce Richardson in the Daily Californian reported some of Eric's conversation with Pastor Owens taken from the tape. Eric feared that others would testify against him:

Guess what I worry about is if they do get arrested and um, uh and become pretty clear that maybe you know they do have enough evidence to convict one of them, if they can put pressure on one of them to testify.

Eric succeeded in eliciting an amount of incriminating conversation which enabled the prosecutor to extract a guilty plea from Pastor Owens.

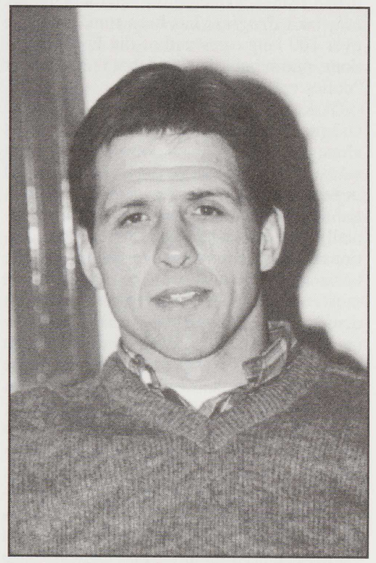
Betrayal is as old as Adam's sons and as widespread as his progeny. Pastor Owens will share the celestial Hall of Fame with others who risked much for righteousness' sake. He ranks with the company of those in our land who resisted slavery seven score years ago. The Rev. Charles T. Torrey, for example, went to prison in 1844 and in squalid conditions died there two and a half years later. An attempted jail break failed when he was betrayed. He had been awaiting sentence and expected prison time for the crime of stealing "property" (a bonded wife and children of a refugee who had requested his help).

We can expect betrayal and jail. These are calculated risks for doing right. Some will be loyal and trustworthy, some will not. I find a certain sympathy for some and scorn for others. Eric Svelmoe was under tremendous pressure. He was confronted with a cost beyond his expectations and he failed the test. But we can pray that it is a temporary fall and that like Peter after the resurrection, he will recover from the denial of Christ. Eric can be commended for doing right. He took a courageous step. May he follow through next time and sustain the unavoidable consequences without delivering up another.

In Cathy Saei, we have another story. If Eric can be compared to Peter, Miss Saei reminds us of Judas. It was her plan to seek out opportunity to betray her friends, because their tactics were "hurting the pro-life movement" in her opinion. (And in my opinion, they hurt the pro-life movement about like Jesus hurt the gospel.) Miss Saei knowingly and willfully plotted the abortion of her friends' efforts. Like Judas, a schemer and Zealot "movement" man who gathered information for betrayal, so she infiltrated, gathered information, and betrayed her friends for the sake of the "movement."

There will be those who falter under pressure, like Eric; and there will be craven Benedict Arnolds, like Cathy Saei. There will be lessons to be learned along the way to the victory which will be ours. First, control your tongue. Whatever the event you are planning (forceful, nonforceful, overt, covert), carefully choose your associates and restrict the information you give. Second, determine to be devoted to one another, preferring one another, as the Scripture says. If you will lay down your life for one another, you will not betray each other. Finally, count the cost carefully, knowing that it may be higher than you think. Remember the price paid by our Lord for us.

Of this we can be sure: whatever the cost is now, it will not remain the same. Pay now, or pay more later. As Thomas Paine said, "These are the times that try men's souls."



Michael Bray is the pastor of Reformation Lutheran Church in Bowie, Maryland.