

FOREWORD

Once in a great while you come across a story that not only horrifies you but makes you stop and seriously consider God's grace in having kept you from a similar situation. Ron Luff, the author of *Faith Gone Astray*, helped the leader of a little religious cult murder a family of five to "purify" their group of believers. At the time, Ron was convinced that he was following the will and command of God. On hearing a story like this, we outsiders shake our heads and ask ourselves, "How could anyone do something like this to a mother, father and three innocent young girls?" The answer is spelled out step by frightening step in *Faith Gone Astray*.

As a teenager, Ron Luff became devoted to the vision of building a heavenly city on earth called Zion. He was one of about 240,000 members in the second largest Mormon denomination, The Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (RLDS). Since 1831, virtually all Mormons have believed that they will build Zion in Independence, Missouri, the location of the RLDS headquarters. Ron's story takes place in the 1980s when the RLDS church leadership promoted changes in practice and theology. RLDS fundamentalists began separating themselves from the main body of the church to form independent congregations. Because of this spiritual crisis, a few men set themselves up to be considered the future RLDS prophet/leader, or "choice seer," who would build the hoped-for Zion. One of these men was a guide at an RLDS historical site, the 1836 Kirtland Temple, located near Cleveland, Ohio. His name was Jeffrey Lundgren.

Lundgren was described by most who knew him as a charismatic, devoted priesthood member in the RLDS version of Mormonism. He became enamored of the Hebrew poetic structure called chiasmus, or reverse parallelism, that is evident in the Old Testament. He also was convinced that Mormonism had gotten it all wrong and that Zion would be centered at Kirtland Temple instead of Independence, Missouri. Lundgren thought chiasmus was the only genuine language of God, and therefore any revelation purporting to come from God, such as the Book of Mormon and parts of the RLDS Doctrine and Covenants, would be written in that style. The only true interpreter of chiasmus would be the "choice seer," or someone taught by him. By setting himself up as the only true interpreter of God's word, Lundgren held a god-like power over his small group of followers. They felt special and God-selected to bring about building Zion and the second coming of Jesus. This faith belief led to murder and later to other perversions to satisfy the commands of their "choice seer."

By any standard, this is a story of disaster. Dennis and Cheryl Avery and their three daughters, 15-year old Trina, 13-year old Becky, and seven-year old Karen, were all murdered. Twelve other members of the cult received

prison sentences varying from 18 months probation to five 20-years-to-life consecutive terms for their participation in the Avery murders. Jeffrey Lundgren, the “choice seer,” was sentenced to death and, after 15 years of appeals, was executed by the State of Ohio in the fall of 2006. Most of the families were separated by prison terms, and several young children were given to relatives to be raised.

But God’s grace, which is not far from any of us, did not abandon Ron Luff and a few others of the group in prison. Away from Lundgren’s influence and forced to think and reason for themselves, they heard the Biblical Gospel of Jesus Christ, believed, and were saved. Ron, who will never be paroled, works with Christian prison ministry and testifies to inmates that they cannot be separated from the love of Jesus Christ. Self-taught in biblical Greek, he has earned a Bachelor of Arts and a Master’s degree in Pastoral Studies from Patriot Bible University in Del Norte, Colorado. Ron is currently pursuing his Doctor of Ministry degree in Pastoral Studies.

Refiner’s Fire Ministries has agreed to publish this story, in part, because the focus of our Christian ministry is towards members of the RLDS church. It is a concern of ours that there are many thousands of fundamentalist RLDS in Restoration branches who still eagerly look forward to a “choice seer” to lead them. Many of these same fundamentalists also believe that chiasmus is God’s divine language. Having separated themselves from the main body of the RLDS church (which renamed itself “Community of Christ” in 2001), they faithfully hold on to the belief they will still build Zion for God. Ron’s story is presented in the hope that none of them, already blinded by their belief in Joseph Smith, will fall under the spell of yet another deceiver.

Ron Luff’s story also applies more broadly to anyone that has ever followed a religious leader who is considered directly in contact with God, and whose interpretation of scripture allows his followers to see the “hidden” things that God supposedly keeps away from ordinary people. By definition, those followers are members of a cult. There are millions of Americans actively involved in cults today who are considered, by those who know them, to be good neighbors, good friends, good workers, and even good Christians. But their faith is not based on a personal relationship with Jesus as their Lord and Savior; their faith is based on a human leader whose “divine” direction is hoped to get them to the heavenly goal they seek. They fail to hear the Good Shepherd’s voice and instead follow the voice of a shepherd who ultimately leads them astray.

In Christ’s love,

Frank Grey
Refiner’s Fire Ministries

For Barbara and Dick Luff