

God, Life, and Everything

The Gospel According to Bundy

All eyes - well some - have been turned toward Oregon these days for the non-siege of a Wildlife refuge that was taken over by a group of militants led by Ammon Bundy. Bundy, whose rancher father had a face off with federal authorities over unpaid grazing fees - a face off he won - says he took over the refuge on God's authority.

Um, what?

In our social media age, it was easy for Bundy to put out his version of what God wants. Just use YouTube. That's where he said: "I began to understand how the Lord felt about the Hammonds. I began to understand what the Lord felt about Harney County and this country. I clearly understood that the Lord was not pleased with what was happening to the Hammonds. And that what was happening to them, if it was not corrected, would be a type and a shadow that would happen to the rest of the people across this country."

Let us refresh our memories on what happened to the Hammonds. Steven and Dwight Hammond were arrested and convicted by a jury of their peers (because that's the American way) for arson. They had burned down a significant tract of federal land to, according to the prosecutor, cover up poaching. Witnesses attested to their poaching. They were sentenced to the federal minimum of five years, but a judge decided (illegally) that they deserved less time and reduced their sentences to a year or less.

Then the federal courts said, "No, they have to serve the minimum." That's it. They're going back to prison till their sentences are up. Happens every day.

Only this isn't really about that.

According to Bundy, God doesn't like the federal government, um, governing. Most especially, he and many in the western states who support him, don't like the fact that the federal government owns so much of the the western states (something we have NO idea about in Hyde Park, right?).

But here's the irony. It is only because the federal government owns all that land that those ranchers get to use it at such low rates. They could never afford it if it were in private hands. They think nobody would snatch it up, and they could simply abuse the land at will for free.

That's delusional, of course. If the land went to the control of the states, they would sell it off to the highest bidder at the first opportunity, because that would put private land on the tax rolls. The ranchers would not be the highest bidder. It's a good bet that large corporations would snap it up at first opportunity and use it, probably, for fossil fuel extraction. Having lived near mines and oil wells, I can say that's not always a pretty sight.

More to the point, that land would be unavailable for ranching (except maybe factory farms). It would be unavailable for hunting. It would be unavailable for recreation. And it would most likely be stripped bare, shredded, carved up and most likely unrecognizable within fifty years.

In short, it is only because this land is in federal hands, where big corporations can't take it away from the people, that these ranchers get to exist at all.

Bundy says this is God's will that he take the land back for "the people". Of course, he doesn't mean the original owners of the land from whom we took the land.

He means private citizens who never owned that land in the first place. All the federal land was unclaimed by even the states. By rights, it belongs to the American People. All of us.

Simply put, all these guys want is to get something for nothing.

Actually (and here's a little side note), not all of them want the same thing. At least one of the occupiers, Jon Ritzheimer, says "I'm trying to achieve exposing Islam." He's so adamant about this that, even though they say they don't want any violence, he posted a farewell video to his family, claiming he's ready to die for his cause.

The likelihood of this happening is small. The militias are generally handled with kid gloves by the federal government. To what degree? Well, they come and go into town unmolested by any authorities. People come to visit them and bring them supplies unmolested by any authorities. In short, they moved into a federal facility that was empty due to the New Year's holiday and have taken it over. They come and go at will and show their rather impressive weaponry off to the news media who eat it up.

But to say what they do is God's will is utter nonsense. Bundy is a Mormon, and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints has already condemned him. His argument that God wants nobody but private people to control the land does not wash with the Gospel either.

Scripture says virtually nothing about private ownership of land. Well, Jesus does say "Give away all you own..."

The Gospel of Bundy is more a Gospel of no constraints, no limits. It's a Gospel of "You can't tell me what to do!" And that, of course, is precisely the opposite of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Our gospel does put constraints on us, constraints which we willingly embrace. In baptism, we vow to renounce evil, to renounce everything that corrupts and destroys the creatures of God (fossil fuel corporations might want to take notice). Mostly, we renounce our life of control and promise to obey Christ as our Lord.

Oh, and as for the voice of God telling him things? In our church, we never trust just the individual who says, "God told me this!" I've worked as a chaplain in a psych unit before (Bellevue Hospital): a lot of people hear God telling them to do things. This doesn't mean God doesn't talk to us, but we know if it's truly God's will, we can check it against scripture and the church's teachings. What Bundy describes could be more at home at Bellevue.

So the long and the short of it is, Ammon Bundy and his militia want the federal government out so they can do what they want without anybody placing limits on them. It is childish and delusional. And it is not Christian.