

Publishing Editor's column

IT IS A fundamental truth about our God that He is everywhere present by His Spirit, so that He knows everything that is going on in the earth, and elsewhere too in the universe He has created. This truth is expressed by the psalmist in Psalm 139: "Whither shall I go from Thy spirit? or whither shall I flee from Thy presence? If I ascend up into heaven, Thou art there: if I make my bed in hell, behold, Thou art there. If I take the wings of the morning, and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea; even there shall Thy hand lead me, and Thy right hand shall hold me" (vv. 7-10). There is comfort and assurance in these words; there is no circumstance or situation in our lives that God is not aware of. There is also a warning; we can hide our thoughts from our fellows, and sometimes our actions too, but nothing is hidden from God.

Nothing that man can do, of course, approaches what God with His all-seeing eye can do, but the technological developments of modern times have enabled a remarkable amount of information to be gathered about us. In 1949 a book by the author George Orwell was published that has become one of the most well-known books of our time. It was, of course, *1984*, in which he depicted a world in which everyone's actions were under observation by an all-seeing government, referred to as 'Big Brother'. He saw it as the outworking, by means of technology already being developed, of the totalitarian system then existing in the Soviet Union, with its extensive network of secret police and informers. However, the Soviet Union crumbled away, and the thought of an all-pervading dictatorship like that depicted by Orwell belongs to the distant past.

Yet the kind of technology needed to introduce an Orwellian society exists today, and more, and there are growing signs of its use. Video cameras record our movements as we walk through city centres; satellites continually take surprisingly detailed pictures of our homes; cameras record our car details as we pass them on our trunk roads; detector vans passing along our roads can see what television programmes we are watching; every phone call that we make can be (and probably is) recorded; emails and internet searches are recorded. Mostly this data is never accessed, but it could be, and civil libertarians are very concerned about the potentialities that it has for misuse. But should we be concerned? I believe we should, in two ways.

There is a popular idea in evangelical and Pentecostal churches that Revelation 13 depicts a worldwide dictatorship that uses these means to impose its will worldwide. I do not believe that this is a valid interpretation of Revelation, and we should avoid being taken in by such ideas. Nevertheless it is possible to envisage circumstances where data that is held about us can be used against us. If, for example, military service was introduced, data about us, in particular our use of the Internet, could be used to demonstrate that there are things in our lives that are not compatible with the beliefs we hold. Things which we think no one else knows about us could be brought up to our shame and the detriment of our case, although we ought, of course, to have been mindful that they are known to God anyway. Is information that we put about ourselves on social network sites compatible with our beliefs and way of life, and could it be used against us?

Then there is the use that commercial companies would like to make of the data held about us. To some extent they already do. The biggest Internet search engine, Google, has aspirations to combine with providers of Internet services and phone services (increasingly the same companies) for targeted marketing of individuals. For example, spending habits might be used to influence people to make further purchases, perhaps by directing them to a nearby shop. This is not helpful to believers wanting to resist "the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life" (1 Jno. 2:16).

Another side to modern technology is the way that it enables people to be constantly in touch. It makes it increasingly difficult for people to be removed from their work. The amazing developments in mobile phone technology, especially when combined with the Internet, means that many people are accessible wherever they are and whatever the time. This is destroying people's ability to detach themselves from their work and concentrate on the more important spiritual things. Moreover it creates a desire for instant information, usually superficial, which is not compatible with the kind of attention that spiritual things require of us. Modern society is very far removed from that which will exist in the age to come when the knowledge of God will fill the earth as the waters cover the sea (Isa. 11:9).

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