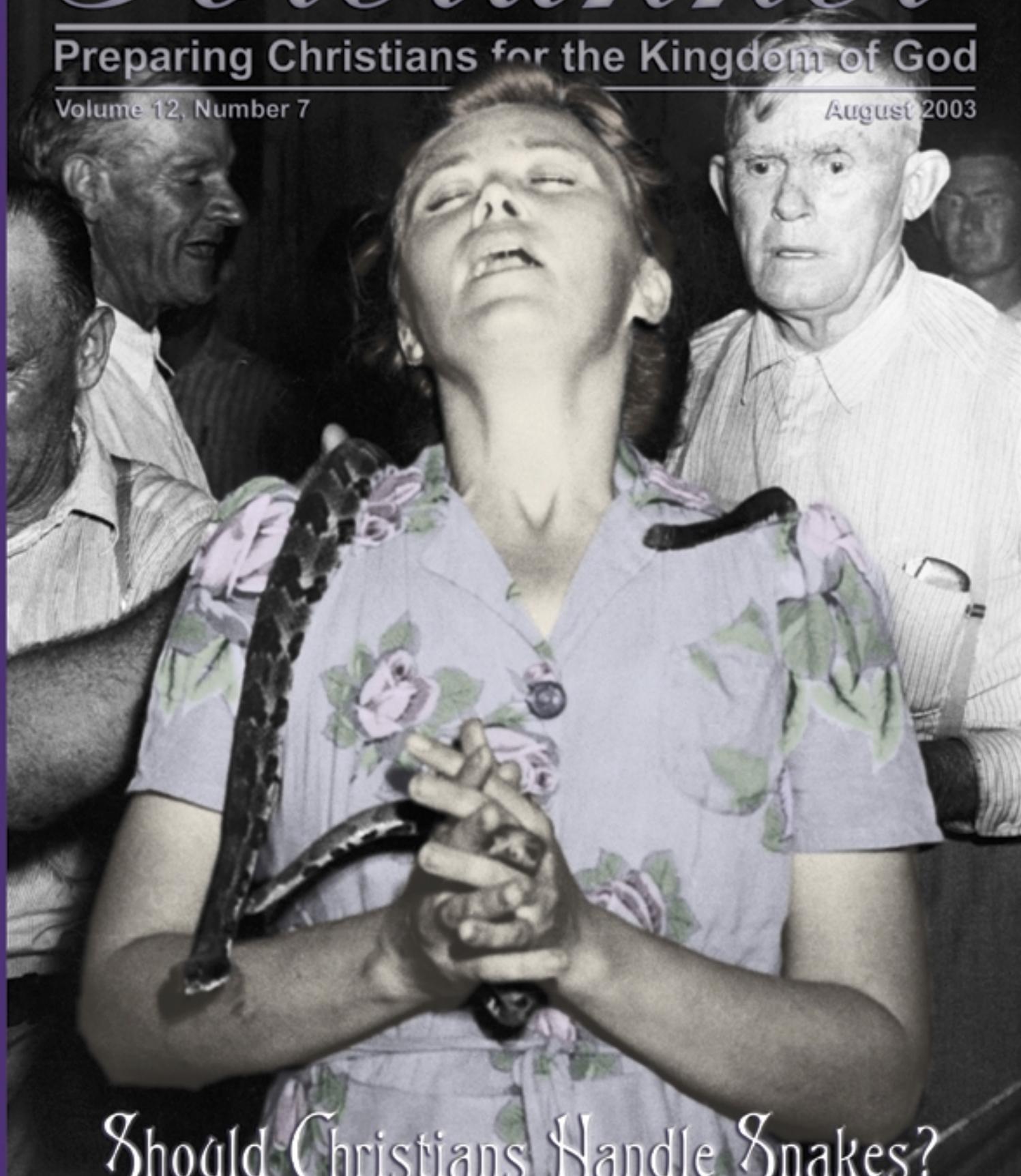


Forerunner

Preparing Christians for the Kingdom of God

Volume 12, Number 7

August 2003



Should Christians Handle Snakes?

August 2003 Contents

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Mark 16:18 says that followers of Christ "will take up serpents." Does this mean that Christians should use snakes in their worship—that doing so without harm proves the indwelling of the Holy Spirit? Or does it simply mean that Jesus promises His disciples protection from snake bites, as happened to the apostle Paul on Malta (Acts 28:1-6)?

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The Offerings of Leviticus

Part Six: The Sin Offering

The previous articles in this series have dealt only with the sweet-savor offerings, commonly called the whole burnt offering, the meal offering, and the peace offering. With this article, we shall begin comparing the distinctions between the sweet-savor offerings and the sin offerings. Some striking differences exist between the two categories, one of the more prominent being that we are to understand that sin plays no role in the sweet-savor offerings. They were offered for God's acceptance on behalf of the worshipper—but not because the worshipper had sinned. God accepted him

because of his devotion, represented by his offering.

Such is not the case with the sin and trespass offerings. Sin is very much part of these offerings. As such, they are not a sweet savor to God. He is merciful and will forgive based on Christ's sacrifice, which these offerings represent, but even though He accepts the offerings, He takes no satisfaction in sin. Sin is described throughout the Bible as abominable, remarkably hateful, and evil to God. Even though sin is described by exceedingly vivid adverbs and adjectives, it is still, nonetheless met and covered by the sacrifice of Christ.

Which Came First?

Leviticus 9:1-10 states,

*“Go to the altar,
offer your sin
offering and your
burnt offering and
make atonement
for yourself and
for the people...”*
—Leviticus 9:7

It came to pass on the eighth day that Moses called Aaron and his sons and the elders of Israel. And he said to Aaron, “Take for yourself a young bull as a sin offering and a ram as a burnt offering, without blemish, and offer them before the LORD. And to the children of Israel you shall speak, saying, ‘Take a kid of the goats as a sin offering, and a calf and a lamb, both of the first year, without blemish, as a burnt offering, also a bull and a ram as peace offerings, to sacrifice before the LORD, and a grain offering mixed with oil; for today the LORD will appear to you.’” So they brought what Moses commanded before the tabernacle of meeting. And all the congregation drew near and stood before the LORD. Then Moses said,

“This is the thing which the LORD commanded you to do, and the glory of the LORD will appear to you.” And Moses said to Aaron, “Go to the altar, offer your sin offering and your burnt offering, and make atonement for yourself and for the people. Offer the offering of the people, and make atonement for them, as the LORD commanded.” Aaron therefore went to the altar and killed the calf of the sin offering, which was for himself. Then the sons of Aaron brought the blood to him. And he dipped his finger in the blood, put it on the horns of the altar, and poured the blood at the base of the altar. But the fat, the kidneys, and the fatty lobe from the liver of the sin offering he burned on the altar, as the LORD had commanded Moses.

This series of verses takes place immediately

after the giving of the instructions for the offerings. The priesthood's ordination and installation into their offices of service at the altar and Tabernacle are about to take place. Verses 2-10 are unique because they are instructions for what will be the first offerings given by the Aaronic priesthood.

Does it not seem plausible that they made the offerings in the correct order the first time they performed them, when little time had passed for people to forget God's commands or even deceitfully corrupt their purity? Moses received the instruction from God, he passed them on to Aaron, and the priests carried them out.

They did so in an interesting progression. Obviously, the order of instruction from God in the first few chapters of Leviticus begins with the burnt offering and proceeds through the meal, peace, sin, and trespass offerings. Did the priests place the offerings on the altar in exactly the same progression? Does it make any difference? Yes, it makes a difference to us because it made a difference to God.

The Bible provides two different orders. The teaching order is given beginning in Leviticus 1. God, it seems, wants us to learn first about devotion to Him and fellow man portrayed by the burnt and meal offerings, as well as our devotion's fruits—gratitude, peace and fellowship—pictured by the peace offering. Following that, His instruction proceeds on to the sin and trespass offerings. However, when the rituals were actually performed at the altar, the sin offering happened first.

Leviticus 9:8 clearly states that the calf of the sin offering was killed first. Aaron then placed the blood from that calf upon the horns of the altar and poured the remainder of its blood at the base of the altar. Following that, its fat, kidneys, and liver lobe were burned on the altar (verse 10), but its flesh and hide were burned outside the camp (verse 11). Not until those ceremonies were fulfilled was the ram of the

burnt offering killed, its blood caught, and all its parts burned atop the altar along with its meal offering (verses 12-14).

Investigating why the instruction order was given one way and the practical application order another should prove both logical and helpful. It helps to remember that Christ is the object of all the offerings. The burnt offering pictures His perfect devotion and obedience to God in keeping the first four commandments. The meal offering depicts an equally perfect devotion and obedience in keeping the remaining six commandments, which apply to relationships with other men. The peace offering shows the perfect communion produced. This sequence portrays His sinless performance in living 33½ years, enabling Him to become the perfect sacrifice for the sins of the world.

This describes what made Him the perfect sin offering. We cannot approach God as a whole burnt offering because we have not devoted ourselves to God and man in perfect sinlessness. Our devotion is flawed. We are not qualified to be a sin offering because we have sinned. We are imperfect, to say the least.

The only way we can approach God is to have the way cleared before us by a perfect sin offering made in our behalf, which in turn prepares the way for us to become acceptable burnt and meal offerings. The perfect sin offering must precede us so we can be accepted before God. We cannot come to God through our own works because they are badly tarnished. We may come to Him only through the work of the life and sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

Once God accepts us into His presence, the love of God begins to be shed abroad in our heart by the Holy Spirit (Romans 5:5). This works to change our heart, preparing us to yield and keep His commandments faithfully in both letter and spirit.

Now hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit which was given to us.

—Romans 5:5

A Second and Third Reason

There is a secondary reason for this sequence that is not unimportant to recognize. This is also the order that our knowledge of Christ and especially the profundity of His sacrifice are revealed to us. Having grown up in America, regardless of whether as a Protestant, Catholic, agnostic, atheist, Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, or whatever, the first thing we ever learn about Jesus Christ is that He died for our sins. We know that He died for our sins long before we begin to understand and appreciate the perfec-

tion of His life. What comes first is a mere factual knowledge that He sacrificed His life as payment for our sins. Usually, it is not until we attempt to walk in His steps and strive to be perfect that any depth of understanding of His accomplishment blossoms.

Even as we were coming into the church guided by personal Bible study, booklets, articles, and sermons, becoming aware of our need for repentance, and being covered and cleansed by the blood of Jesus Christ, this fact

was foremost in our mind. We do not even begin to value the perfection of His submission to the Father as a burnt and meal offering until we try to live perfectly ourselves. Then, it begins to dawn on us what a marvelous thing He accomplished—perfection in living.

This may not be a perfect illustration, but perhaps it will help nonetheless: Imagine that every time a person drove from the golf tee, he hit a hole in one; or shot for the basketball hoop, he scored; or swung his baseball bat, he connected for a home run! Sports are ultimately meaningless activities and these wonderful but impossible athletic accomplishments mere vanities in comparison to the importance and difficulty of what Jesus accomplished.

Thus, the order of application shows how we must come to view and understand Christ's importance to us. First, we believe and request the sin offering to be applied to us, then we progress to the perfection of the burnt and meal offerings. The Bible presents the instruction in the other direction because God wants to impress on our minds as we begin to understand that, in order for Christ to become a sin offering, He first had to be perfect. This allows us to appreciate what He did to a far greater degree.

The apostle Paul warns us in I Corinthians 11:29 not to partake of the Passover bread and wine without discerning the Lord's body. A deeply appreciative and perceptive understanding of Christ's sacrifice is possible only in those who have strived to emulate Him by being living sacrifices, not conforming to this world and having our mind renewed by His Spirit as we endeavor to go on to perfection (see Romans 12:1-2; Hebrews 6:1).

A third reason for the application order begin-

ning with the sin offering is that it reminds us how our communion, our fellowship, with God is established. We do not go to God on our own strength but with a sin offering preceding us. We are permitted into the heavenly Holy of Holies because the veil was rent by the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. We did not rend the veil through our works. The continuous application of the sin offering establishes and maintains our communion with God. Our use of this knowledge is definitely not limited to initiating fellowship with God because we sin after our initial cleansing and need His forgiveness repeatedly.

Leviticus 4:3, 13, 22, 27 contain additional, helpful information:

If the anointed priest sins, bringing guilt on the people, then let him offer to the LORD for his sin which he has sinned a young bull without blemish as a sin offering. . . . Now if the whole congregation of Israel sins unintentionally, and the thing is hidden from the eyes of the assembly, and they have done something against any of the commandments of the LORD in anything which should not be done, and are guilty. . . . When a ruler has sinned, and done something unintentionally against any of the commandments of the LORD his God in anything which should not be done, and is guilty. . . . If anyone of the common people sins unintentionally by doing something against any of the commandments of the LORD in anything which ought not to be done, and is guilty. . . .

These charges cover every stratum of society. Thus, God addresses all sins not willfully and rebelliously committed.

Therefore, leaving the discussion of the elementary principles of Christ, let us go on to perfection, not laying again the foundation...

—Hebrews 6:1

Atonement and the Offerings

The English word *atonement* appears in Leviticus 4:20, 26, 31, 35 in reference to these sin offerings, as it does in Leviticus 1:4 in reference to the burnt offering: "Then he shall put his hand on the head of the burnt offering, and it will be accepted on his behalf to make atonement for him." This is the last time "atonement" appears in reference to the sweet-savor offerings in Leviticus 1-3.

"Atonement" may mislead some because we almost automatically think of a covering for sin. Atonement for sin normally makes one acceptable before God, but sin is not present in the sweet-savor offerings. Nonetheless, the word indeed conveys the sense of acceptance but on a differ-

ent basis than in the sin and trespass offerings. The basis for acceptance in the sweet-savor offerings is the offerer's perfect devotion, picturing the devoted, sinless Christ worshipping God.

Concerning the sin and trespass offerings, "atonement" is used in the way we normally understand it: as a covering, payment, expiation, or propitiation made for sin. It is as though the offerer is charged just as the police charge a person with a crime. In this case, though, the offerer is charged with sin, and something must expiate it. The sin and trespass offerings, then, indicate the payment of a legal obligation to an authority, one that meets the legal requirement

of that authority. To expiate sin, the payment must be in blood; a life must be given. The Authority is God, as His law has been broken.

The wages of sin is death (Romans 6:23). Whenever a person sins, the law has the power to take that person's life. It has such power over us that, for our debt to be paid, a life is required. Nothing less is suitable to expiate sin. In the symbolism of the sin and trespass offerings, the life of an animal is given, covering the indebtedness and breaking the power the law has over us.

In actual practice, the ritual proceeded like this: The offerer brought his animal before the priest and then laid his hand upon the head of his

offering. Symbolically, a transfer took place so that the animal is understood as portraying the sinner making the offering. The animal then died, and the penalty was considered paid.

In Romans 6:2, Paul writes that we are "dead to sin," and in Romans 7:4, that we are "dead to the law." The ritual portrays these truths. The sin and trespass offerings picture a convicted sinner coming before God to receive the judgment of death. However, the animal's death portrays Christ's vicarious death in our stead, for in reality, since He is the offering, our sins have been transferred to Him. In this way, we are atoned for and redeemed.

Redemption Only Through Perfection

Although these offerings are not sweet saviors, they had to be just as perfect as the burnt and meal offerings. The animal had to be without blemish to compare favorably with Christ's sinlessness. In addition, animals cannot sin, so as long as the offerer selected a properly unblemished animal, it was seen as a good substitute to represent Christ symbolically.

Peter writes:

And if you call on the Father, who without partiality judges according to each one's work, conduct yourselves throughout the time of your sojourning here in fear; knowing that you were not redeemed with corruptible things, like silver or gold, from your aimless conduct received by tradition from your fathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot. (I Peter 1:17-19)

Redemption involves buying back something that has been taken away. Herbert Armstrong spoke metaphorically of our being kidnapped by Satan. Because he has forcibly held us from the liberty God wants us to experience, we must be redeemed. We are in this humanly inescapable predicament because we have sinned in following the same manner of living as everybody else. We are released from this by means of the payment of the sinless life of Jesus Christ in a vicarious death in our place and by our repentance. Because He was sinless, our sinful imperfections can be overcome and paid for.

Would imperfection in an animal disqualify it from being offered on the altar? Yes, very much so, even if the imperfection was internal and invisible to the eye. If it had a lame leg, or if its hide

was marred by scarring or was ragged and mangy in appearance, it was not acceptable. If one of its eyes had been gouged out or was infected, or if its ear had been torn by a predator, it was disqualified. If it had a disease, even an internal cancer or tumor, it was unfit, even though it might have looked reasonably healthy to casual, external observation so that only the owner knew of its imperfection.

Each of these physical flaws represents spiritual imperfections that could have been in Christ except that He was perfect in all His ways. For 33½ years, He never once had even a single, tiny, solitary moral or spiritual imperfection. He never did anything unethical, immoral, or unspiritual. Not one instance of any kind of carnality marred His life. Even if the thought of sin arose in Him, He quickly put it out of His mind. Always, in every instance, He used the mind of God.

Thus, sin never desecrated or blemished Him in any way, internally or externally. He did not carry around any envy, bitterness, or gall—there was nothing in Him that would disqualify Him in any way from being a fit sacrifice to pay the penalty for our sins. It is astounding that anyone could live this way for even a day or two, let alone 33½ years!

Christ qualified in every way to be the sacrifice for our sins. Consider, however, that the literal sin offering He made at His crucifixion took only a few hours to unfold. By comparison, His efforts to qualify to be the sin offering by being a perfect burnt, meal, and peace offering required 33½ years of sinless living!

Reflecting upon what Christ accomplished is sobering to anyone of a mature mind who has attempted to duplicate even a small portion of what He did. It should certainly lead us to the deepest gratitude we can offer. Isaiah 53:9-10

... You were...
redeemed... with
the precious blood
of Christ, as of a
lamb without
blemish and
without spot.

P—I Peter 1:18-19

gives us an insight into God's attitude toward His Son's sacrifice:

And they made His grave with the wicked—but with the rich at His death, because He had done no violence, nor was any deceit in His mouth. Yet it pleased the LORD to bruise Him; He has put Him to grief. When You make His soul an offering for sin, He

shall see His seed, He shall prolong His days, and the pleasure of the LORD shall prosper in His hand.

Not even one time did Christ's heart rise up in an attempt to deceive or to strike out in violent anger. He was childlike in attitude yet mature in His wisdom, but it pleased God to bruise and put Him to grief as the offering for our sins.

A Great Payment Creates Obligations

This is in sharp contrast to what I John 1:8–2:1 says about us:

If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar, and His word is not in us. My little children, these things I write to you, that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.

John is instructing us about the obligation we have due to receiving atonement through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Forgiveness does not remove from us the obligation to keep the commands of God. The law of God is not done away once we are under the blood of Jesus Christ. His death paid for our *past* sins. Though His death will pay for sins committed after our original forgiveness, we are urged not to break God's laws. Sinning without serious regard and deep appreciation for Christ's death brings us into danger of committing the unpardonable sin (Hebrews 10:26, 28-29). A disciplined and robust effort to obey God's commands witnesses to Him the depth of our appreciation for the grace He gives through Christ.

Hebrews 10:1 reflects upon the place the Old Testament offerings have in giving understanding of Jesus Christ: "For the law, having a shadow of the good things to come, and not the very image of the things, can never with these same sacrifices, which they offer continually year by year, make those who approach perfect." The sacrificial laws only portrayed reality; they were enacted to depict something greater to come. What Leviticus 1-5 describes is the shadow of the good things; Christ is the reality.

Why could they not make a person perfect who believed in them and offered them? Why did One so great have to die so that we might

live? An illustration from a dollars-and-cents basis may help us understand. Can something of lesser value, an animal, equal the cost of something of greater value, a man? Is a bull, lamb, goat, or turtledove worth as much as a human being?

What if a person went into a store to purchase—redeem, compensate for, propitiate, expiate—an item costing a hundred dollars, but he offered to pay only fifty dollars? What would the owner say? Would he not say, "You don't have enough here to pay for this, so you cannot have it." So, he leaves and returns with a twenty-dollar bill. The owner says, "That still is not enough." Leaving again, he returns with a ten-dollar bill. It is still not enough. In the analogy, he must repeat this process continually, always attempting to use something of lesser value to receive something of greater value.

Consider, however, what God did. We are the item being purchased, and our redemption price—our cost to Him—is the expiation of our sins. God laid down a multi-trillion dollar note to redeem us: Christ. God gave the life of the Creator to pay the penalty for sin. He did not offer a lesser being for us—an animal is not sufficient to redeem even one human. God came through with a payment that is not merely adequate to meet the cost of one person's redemption, but is so great it satisfies the cost for all the sins of the whole of mankind for all time! God met the total indebtedness of all mankind with one payment.

The last phrase of Hebrews 10:1 says that the animal sacrifices did not make those who followed them perfect. In verse 2, the writer follows this with the question, "For then would they not have ceased to be offered?" He is providing evidence that no animal, no matter how unblemished, can pay the price of a man's sins because a human is worth too much. In verse 3, he proclaims that the sacrifices only reminded the people of how sinful they were and that their sins had yet to be paid for. In verse 4, he concludes that it is just not possible for any animal to pay for the sins of any man.

God simply will not accept the blood of an

If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. —I John 1:8

animal for the life of a man. The sacrificial law was a schoolmaster (Galatians 3:24), intended by God to instruct by putting people through the exercise of making the sacrifice. How much those making the actual offerings learned is

unknown, but they are very effective teachers for those of us under the New Covenant, if we incline our minds to them and seek God's help in understanding. Above all, they teach us the value of Christ's sacrifice.

Once for All

The instruction continues in Hebrews 10:5-7, a monologue in which God the Son, Savior and Creator of mankind, addresses the Father:

Therefore, when He came into the world, He said: "Sacrifice and offering You did not desire, but a body You have prepared for Me. In burnt offerings and sacrifices for sin you have no pleasure. Then I said, 'Behold, I have come—in the volume of the book it is written of Me—to do your will, O God.'"

He explains that, when He came into the world, God provided Him with a human body, thus enabling Him to be a sacrifice. He carries this thought further by saying that God did not desire the Levitical offerings to serve as the means of forgiveness and acceptance before Him. Rather, God sent Him into the world to fulfill His will—to be the sacrifice for mankind's sins.

Hebrews 10:9-10 confirms this and progresses the thought one step further: "Then He said, 'Behold, I have come to do Your will, O God.' He takes away the first that He may establish the second. By that will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all." God's purpose was to remove the Levitical sacrifices ("the first") and replace them with the sacrifice of Jesus Christ ("the second"). In terms of power and value, this sacrifice is of such magnitude that, once made, it is sufficient to cover all sins. It does not have to be made repeatedly.

The writer adds in verses 11-12: "And every priest stands ministering daily and offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. But this Man, after He had offered one sacrifice for sins forever, sat down at the right hand of God." This part of God's creative work in us is finished! There will be no

more sacrifice for man's sins. Christ sat down; this aspect of His work is done.

Verses 14-18 then dogmatically state:

For by one offering He has perfected forever those who are being sanctified. But the Holy Spirit also witnesses to us; for after He had said before, "This is the covenant that I will make with them after those days, says the LORD: I will put My laws into their hearts, and in their minds I will write them." Then He adds, "Their sins and their lawless deeds I will remember no more." Now where there is remission of these, there is no longer an offering for sin.

II Corinthians 5:18-19 adds important considerations to this subject:

Now all things are of God, who has reconciled us to Himself through Jesus Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation, that is, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them, and has committed to us the word of reconciliation.

Part of the responsibility of the church of God in preaching the gospel around the world is to inform mankind how they can be reconciled to God. In many cases, people do not even know they are separated from God. However, all have been separated from Him, and all need to be reconciled to God through the redemption offered in Christ's payment for sin. To do this, we must also proclaim what sin is, as many are equally ignorant of what constitutes sin. Doing this enables them to judge their need for reconciliation through Jesus Christ.

"This is the covenant that I will make with them after those days, says the LORD: I will put My laws into their hearts, and in their minds I will write them"

—Hebrews 10:16

He Became Sin for Us

Preaching the gospel is not just about the Kingdom of God but includes many attendant features that flesh out understanding necessary for establishing communion with God.

Paul goes on to say, "Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were pleading through us: we implore you on Christ's

(continued on page 18)

“And these signs
will follow those who believe:
In My name . . .
they will take up serpents . . .”
Mark 16:17-18

Should Christians Handle Snakes?

Of the gospel writers, Mark is the only one to record the following account:

Afterward [after Christ’s resurrection] He appeared to the eleven as they sat at the table; and He rebuked their unbelief and hardness of heart, because they did not believe those who had seen Him after He had risen. And He said to them, “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature. He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned. And these signs will follow those who believe: In My name they will cast out demons; they will speak with new tongues; *they will take up serpents*; and if they drink anything deadly, it will by no means hurt them; they will lay hands on the sick, and they will recover.” So then, after the Lord had spoken to them, He was received up into heaven, and sat down at the right hand of God. And they went out and preached everywhere, the Lord working with them and confirming the word through the accompanying signs. Amen. (Mark 16:14-20)

These verses are similar to both Matthew’s and Luke’s versions of Christ’s commission to the apostles (Matthew 28:16-20; Luke 24:36-49).

However, only Mark includes the “signs [that] will follow those who believe.” Are they commands for the followers of Christ or promises? In particular, does Jesus say Christians should handle snakes, or does He promise to protect them if they are bitten?

Growing up in the rolling hills of middle Tennessee, I was vaguely aware of churches in rural areas that handled snakes as part of their church services. Personally, I have always felt that the only good snake was a dead snake; to handle one, in or out of church, would never enter my head. Even so, some people believe that handling a snake is a command from God—an act of faith—and that He promises to protect you when you do it.

In 1910, after reading Mark 16:18, former bootlegger George Went Hensley took a box with him into the church pulpit. Inside the box was a rattlesnake, which Mr. Hensley proceeded to reach in and lift out. He encouraged his congregation to do likewise. It surprises me that he even had a congregation after this, but news of what he had done spread through the Grasshopper Valley in southeastern Tennessee and others joined him in handling snakes. Another surprise is that it took ten years before someone died of snakebite.

George Hensley became somewhat famous and his following grew.

“And these signs will follow those who believe: In My name . . . they will take up serpents . . .”

There were approximately 2,500 snake-handlers in America in the early 1940s. When deaths from snakebites became prevalent, state legislatures passed laws, which forbade the taking up of snakes in religious services. Despite the new statutes, snake-handling persisted. Between 1936-1973, 35 persons died from poisonous bites, including Hensley who died on June 24, 1955 at the age of 74.

Snake-handling continues today, mostly in small, rural areas of Tennessee and Kentucky, along with pockets in other southern states. These snake-handling churches are Pentecostal in type, with those that feel “the spirit” comes over them as they open the boxes containing the snakes, lift them high (sometimes multiple snakes) and allow them to wind around their arms and bodies. The “believers” seem to go into a trance, dancing around and speaking in tongues.

As recently as October 1998, the *Knoxville News-Sentinel* ran the following story:

One of the prominent leaders of snake-handling churches in the Southeast died October 3 after being bitten by a rattlesnake during a church service at the Rock House Holiness Church in rural northeastern Alabama. John Wayne “Punkin” Brown, Jr., of Parrottsville, Tennessee, was preaching with his own 3-foot-long timber rattler in hand when the reptile sank one fang into his finger.

Mr. Brown’s wife, Melinda, had died three years earlier from a rattlesnake bite received at the Full Gospel Tabernacle in Jesus Name Church in Middlesboro, Kentucky. The Browns left behind five young children. The Browns had been bitten dozens of times prior to the fatal bites.

Let us examine Mark 16:18 to see if true Christians should add snake-handling to their list of doctrinal beliefs.

A Command?

Was Christ commanding us to perform these practices or promising protection? Many in the church believe, and it may well be, that Christ was speaking only to those God has called to preach the gospel. After all, in verse 15, He had said to the *eleven remaining disciples*, “Go into all the world.” Combine this with the fact that we can see examples of the apostles fulfilling these signs in the New Testament and a case can be made for this view.

A snake bit the apostle Paul while he was on the island of Malta, and no harm came to him (Acts 28:1-6). However, he did not go looking for the snake in an effort to prove his faith. The snake bit him unexpectedly, in front of others, and God protected him as promised.

Luke writes that “the seventy returned with joy, saying, “Lord, even the demons are subject to us in Your name” (Luke 10:17). He also records in Acts 5:12, “. . . through the hands of the apostles many signs and wonders were done among the people.” It is quite possible that this section of Mark applies to the apostles and perhaps is further limited to their lifetimes, that is, the first century. A slight problem with this conclusion is that Mark 16:17 says, “. . . these signs will follow *those who believe*.” It would appear that these verses apply to all believers, all Christians, regardless of when they live.

When the former whiskey runner, George Hensley, read Mark 16:18, he lifted it out of context from the rest of the Bible. Are there any other verses that might apply to Mr. Hensley’s belief that Christians should march around a church hall with slithering serpents attached to their limbs?

In Matthew 4, Satan tempts Christ in various ways. At one point, he tries to get Jesus to throw Himself off the roof of the Temple, saying, “For it is written: ‘He shall give His angels charge concerning you,’ and,

‘In their hands they shall bear you up, lest you dash your foot against a stone’” (verse 6). Here Satan twists Psalm 91:11-12, which says, “For He shall give His angels charge over you, to keep you in all your ways.

Is Mark 16:17-18 Inspired?

A highly controversial point in religious circles is whether Mark 16:9-20 is actually part of Scripture. Although it appears in the King James and New King James versions, many other translations either label this section as an appendix or leave it in the footnotes, as does the Revised Standard Version of the Bible. The Moffatt translation, together with the Goodspeed translation and others, not only has the long ending found in the King James Version, but it also has *another* shorter ending.

In *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (1971), Bruce Metzger, a noted authority on textual matters, writes:

The last twelve verses of the commonly received text of Mark are absent from the two oldest Greek manuscripts (Aleph and B), from the Old Latin codex Bezae Cantabrigiae (it^k), the Sinaitic Syriac manuscript, about one hundred Armenian manuscripts, and the two oldest Georgian manuscripts (written AD 897 and AD 913).

Yet, he also notes, “The traditional ending of Mark, so familiar through the AV and other translations of the *Textus Receptus* [Received Text], *is present in the vast number of witnesses*” (our

They shall bear you up in their hands, lest you dash your foot against a stone.” God is promising protection to His people here, telling us that He will place His angels about us. He is not telling us to

attempt to hurt ourselves in a deliberate effort to see if He will come through for us.

Interestingly, the next verse tells us that we will “tread upon the lion and the cobra” and that we will “trample underfoot” the “young lion and the serpent” (verse 13). Again,

within the context of Psalm 91, God is promising His protection.

When Satan attempts to persuade Christ to jump off a building to prove that He truly is the Son of God, He answers the Devil, “It is written again, ‘You shall not tempt the LORD your
(continued on page 17)

9-20 Scripture?

emphasis). Despite this, he concludes that the longer ending is “secondary,” meaning “that the section was excerpted from another document, dating perhaps from the first half of the second century.” To bolster his conclusion, he cites “internal evidence”: non-Markan vocabulary and style within the section and the “awkward” connection between verse 8 and verses 9-20.

Contrary to this, the longer ending to Mark’s gospel is quoted extremely early in church history as Markan. Between AD 182 and 188, Irenaeus, a disciple of Polycarp, quotes Mark 16:19 as a part of Mark’s account (*Against Heresies* iii.10.6). There are allusions to these disputed verses in even earlier writings, although not as true quotations.

Not only did Irenaeus accept it as a part of Mark’s gospel when arguing with “heretics,” but, says James Hastings:

No writer before Eusebius [(c. AD 260-340) court favorite and church historian in the days of the Roman emperor Constantine] is known to have rejected them, and their presence in all later MSS [manuscripts] shows that the successors of Eusebius, in spite of his great authority,

did not follow his judgment in the matter.

In addition, records of the traditional liturgical calendars of several churches (for instance, the Greek, Syrian, Armenian, and Coptic churches), originating before the fourth century, include these disputed verses without reservation as part of the services. These facts point plainly to the great antiquity of the longer ending as preserved in the common English versions.

In his exhaustive study, “The Last Twelve Verses of the Gospel According to St. Mark Vindicated Against Recent Objectors and Established” (1871), Dean John William Burgon evaluates these verses on stylistic and historical grounds and comes to the exact opposite conclusion to Metzger. He finds that the claim of their non-authenticity rests on shoddy scholarship and an over-reliance on the Western texts, Sinaiticus and Vaticanus, which, though early, are at variance with most other biblical manuscripts. He even asserts that Vaticanus contains a blank column where Mark 16:9-20 should be, left there by a scribe to show that it had intentionally been excluded.

If these last verses of Mark’s gospel were left out, the book would not come to an orderly conclusion, as does every other book of the Bible. In fact, it would end on notes of fear and failure: “And they [the women who visited Jesus’ tomb] said nothing to anyone, for they

were afraid” (Mark 16:8)—hardly a fitting ending for an account of hope and salvation.

Further, no Christian doctrine rests on the authenticity of Mark 16:9-20. Every point in Mark 16:9-20—except for “if they drink anything deadly, it will by no means hurt them”—has scriptural backup elsewhere in the New Testament, and even the exception parallels the spirit of the surrounding promises to the disciples. Therefore, even if this concluding section were a later addition, no Christian doctrine is in any way affected.

As for the vocabulary and style differences, in the end they turn out to be highly inflated guesses. Several words are used for the first time in the book, and a few others are used differently than elsewhere. However, these variations are no worse than the style and vocabulary differences between, for example, Paul’s Pastoral Epistles and his other letters, John’s writing in Revelation and his gospel and epistles, or Peter’s two epistles. Authors are not bound to what scholars assume to be the limit of their vocabularies and styles.

Even with all of this proof, the decision comes down to the faithfulness of God. Is God able to preserve His Word or not? Human writings are filled with error, but the Bible is complete, inspired, and wholly preserved through the power of God. We can trust that these verses are an inspired part of the Word of God.

—Richard T. Ritenbaugh

Southern Christianity Moves North

God shall send them strong delusion,
that they should believe a lie.
II Thessalonians 2:11

Last month we looked at a phenomenon called Southern Christianity, a native version of Christian groups in South America, Africa, Asia, and Oceania. During the last century, particularly the last fifty years, Southern Christianity has surprised everyone by displaying spectacular growth. Today, Southern Christianity—typically evangelical, Pentecostal, and fundamental—is characterized by its structural disunity and its undisguised moral conservatism. Its hundreds of groups around the world are fiercely independent, in many cases shunning affiliation with Western denominations. In fact, the dynamism of Southern Christianity marks it as a reaction against the formalism and liberalism that has crept into many American and European denominations, leaving them morally and doctrinally moribund. Southern Christians are generally otherworldly, unafraid of the mysterious and mystical; they often place heavy emphasis on Biblical prophecy. Finally, Southern Christianity is often syncretistic, borrowing doctrinal and liturgical elements from different denominations and even other religions. It is not surprising, then, to observe these groups often crossing denominational lines.

The hallmark of Southern Christianity is its moral conservatism. While God's true church cannot, of course, subscribe to most of Southern Christians'

doctrines (such as the Trinity, false holidays, Sunday worship, etc.), it can relate to their firm belief in God's sovereignty, their acceptance of both the Old and New Testaments as God's inerrant revelation (which they misunderstand), and their staunch moral stance against abortion, homosexuality, permissiveness, and the like. More often than not, Southern Christians are exponents of traditional family values and proactive child-rearing techniques.

From a larger cultural perspective, Southern Christianity appears to be a reaction against the West. Its ethos is heartily opposed to the economic materialism, humanistic secularism, and agnostic (if not atheistic) liberalism that the West has come to accept and promulgate. In this lies perhaps the paramount feature of Southern Christianity: It repudiates the postmodern; it rejects what the West is, and it refuses what the West offers the world. Southern Christians swim in the other direction, against the current of modernism. Increasingly, Western liberal elites have come to see it as countercultural.

This "clash of civilizations," to use Samuel Huntington's famous term, would be bad enough if Southern Christianity were there—in the south, far from North America. However, Southern Christianity has moved north—into America—with *gusto*.

THE LIBERALS' NIGHTMARE

We are all aware of the phrase, "the best laid plans of mice and men." Things do not always work as expected. Nothing could be a better example of that truism than the Immigration Reform Act of 1965, which opened the floodgates to immigrants from Latin America, Asia, and Africa. Indeed, liberals craftily engineered the law to "diversify" American culture, to weaken the fiber of traditional (that is, Christian) religion. Their idea was to render America less and less Christian as time went by, as the sheer numbers of Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, and others diluted America's Christianity. This was their real motive: to weaken the influence of Christianity, proving once and for all that Christianity and national greatness were not related.

Well—the best laid plans of mice and men! One

CHRISTIANITY

T W O

commentator observes that the Immigration Reform Act paved the road for

a far-reaching restructuring of American religious life, in directions that were distinctly conservative and traditionalist. . . . While mass immigration is indeed having an enormous religious impact, the main beneficiary of the process is unquestionably Christianity. Far more than most secular observers yet appreciate, the vast majority of new immigrants are Christian. . . . More catastrophic still, from the point of view of our secular elites, the Christianity that these newcomers espouse is commonly fideistic [reliant on faith rather than reason to ascertain truth], charismatic, otherworldly, and (nightmare of nightmares) fundamentalist.¹

Let's examine this influx of Christian immigrants—and the liberals' nightmares—in a bit more detail.

SOUTHERN CHRISTIANITY IN AMERICA

Statistics indicating the magnitude of the human tide to these shores are not hard to come by. The number of immigrants (and their children) who have reached America as a result of the 1965 Act is nearing 20% of the total American population. Amazingly, 5% arrived within the last decade.² What is not so obvious is that most of these people are Christians. (Throughout this article, I use the terms *Christian* and *Christianity* to refer to Satan's counterfeit of the way of life Christ taught; see Revelation 12:9.)

Conventional wisdom does not lead us astray when it observes that most of the immigrants from Latin America are Roman Catholic, although, surprising to many, about 20% are Protestant Pentecostals. That means America will boast about 100 million Roman Catholics and Pentecostals (of various degrees of fervor) by 2050. Make no mistake about it, the bulk of these immigrant Catholics are not "modern" Catholics—those who practice birth control and favor abortion. Rather, Catholic immigrants from Latin America tend to be loyal to the

Pope and avowedly conservative—traditionalist—in outlook. The same moral and political conservatism characterizes the Pentecostals who cross the border with them.

The growth patterns of America's major religious denominations during the last decade or so reflect the ever-deepening influence of Southern Christianity. *Almost everywhere, conservative religious groups are gaining adherents, while moderate and liberal ones are experiencing decline.* Since 1990, "old fashioned" groups have outstripped those espousing "contemporary" values hands down. The Southern Baptists have grown by 4.9%, the Catholic Church in America by 16.2%, and the Assemblies of God (a Pentecostal group) by 18.5%. All this at the expense of the mainline churches, such as the Presbyterian Church USA, whose membership rolls declined by 11.6% in the same time period, and the highly liberal United Church of Christ, which chalked up a 14.8% decline. The handwriting is on the wall: Liberalism is not where it's at!

What are the predominant religious preferences of immigrants from Africa and Asia? The answer may surprise you. These people, also, are largely Christian. "Among Korean-Americans, for example, Christians presently outnumber Buddhists by more than ten to one."³ Most Filipino immigrants are Catholic. Korean and Vietnamese immigrants are typically Christian. Similarly, many African immigrants are Christian. "Independent and prophetic African churches are now firmly rooted in American cities, from which they plan ambitious evangelistic expansion."⁴

It appears that, as a general rule, the Asians and Africans who have the money and the motivation to relocate to the United States are Southern Christians. What motivates many of these people to come to America is truly amazing: They often share a driving desire to *evangelize* America. These people actually come as missionaries to "heathen" America to convert her peoples "back" to Christianity. El Shaddai, a Catholic charismatic group centered in the Philippines, funds and operates an evangelistic network in 25 nations, including the United States and Canada. "Few observers predicted that [the Pacific Rim nations] would increasingly become a Christian Arc."⁵

Certainly, that was not in the mind of the liberals when they crafted the 1965 Immigration Reform Act!

THE LIE

Those designers, the liberal post-moderns who form the elite policy makers in America, have striven ardently for decades to turn America into an unre-servedly secular nation. Their goal is the ultimate obliteration of every vestige of Christianity from our culture, not only from the public square, but from private conscience as well. Examples of the public policies they have introduced to further their ends include banning prayer in the public schools, refusing to allow religious symbols on government property, and employing the IRS to harass ministers who preach conservative values.

Part of the liberals' strategy has been to use immigration policy to create "diversity." This means they want to dilute traditional religious patterns, injecting into America numbers of people practicing religions that had not hitherto been a significant part of her religious experience. Alas, that diversity of

religions simply has not materialized. The religious potpourri they sought to create through increased immigration is today more fantasy than reality.

For, the fact remains: *The aggregate number of Jews, Buddhists, Muslims, Sikhs, and Hindus living in America today is only about five percent of the population.* This statistic does not do much to promote the myth that America is religiously diverse. The reality is that America is *less* religiously diverse than many nations in the Middle and Far East, "where religious minorities commonly make up 10 or 20 percent of the population, or even more."⁶

Diversity eludes the liberal social engineers, who watch in dismay as America becomes more solidly Christian every day. True, America's new Christianity is not old-line Protestant Christianity. It is far from the WASP-religion that predominated American religious life as late as the middle 1900s. Nonetheless, it is Christianity anyway—in highly charismatic, fundamental, and evangelistic dress. Southern Christianity moved north is the liberals' worst nightmare.

So far, the liberal reaction to the growth of Southern Christianity in this country has been to suppress

FROM A TO Z A ZAMBIAN LESS

Not only Gentile religionists, like the Southern Christians, but also Gentile writers and commentators serve to instruct modern-day Israel regarding God's law. A recent—and poignant—case in point is a feature editorial appearing in the principal Zambian newspaper, *The Times of Zambia*, January 20, 2003. The author is George Roberts, a former staff writer for another organ, the *Northern News*. By and large, the article is so close to reflecting God's truth that it could be reprinted verbatim in *Forerunner*.

Roberts' subject is HIV/AIDS. He opens the article, which occupies five full columns, about half the page, with a statement reminiscent of Herbert Armstrong's approach to problem-resolution. "The world's worst response to what is regarded as the most devastating pandemic in human history lies in dealing with symptoms, without seriously tackling the cause."

Roberts continues with straightforward comments the likes of which one would never read in the *New York Times* or other liberal organs in this country:

HIV/AIDS is primarily a moral issue. Sex before marriage, fornication, adultery, rape,

incest, sexual violence, homosexuality, prostitution, polygamy, pornography, child abuse, are all serious sins against God. Calling it [by any other name] does not in any way alter God's view of these wrong patterns of behavior that His Word says He hates. . . . The Bible's moral standards are very clear. Non-married persons should abstain from sexual relations, married persons must remain faithful and should not commit adultery. The foregoing amount to just 17 words, 103 letters, and yet is the only fool-proof antidote.

Next, Roberts blasts the media, politicians, and national and church leaders:

All these have one thing they hold in common, total disregard of the Creator's laws. National leaders, church leaders and politicians should take a leaf from the book of Ezra 7:10, which says "For Ezra himself had prepared his heart to consult the law of Jehovah and to do it. . . ." To put the matter into perspective one must go back to the beginning of man's existence in the garden of Eden. In order to instill in man a fundamental

the truth—hide the facts from the public. They do not advertise, for instance, the straightforward demographic that, at current growth rates, America will boast a larger Latino population—most of whom are Catholic or Pentecostal—than any nation except Mexico and Brazil by 2050.⁷ The liberals' strategy is to keep the public ignorant, lest it figure out that America remains a "Christian" nation after all!

Liberals have pressed into service the media, which they largely control, to portray America as no longer a "Christian" nation, but a fully secular one—in spite of the fact that there are at least six nominal Christians for every one secularist in the general population. The media consistently lie, painting the American religious makeup as highly diverse.

A good example of their lack of candor is the glowing—almost outlandish—praise widely lavished on a 2001 book by Diana Eck, a scholar in religious studies. Eck's book, *A New Religious America: How a Christian Country Has Now Become the World's Most Religiously Diverse Nation*, is sheer hogwash. Yet, reviewers extolled it for revealing "the new 'pluralism' that is sweeping away Chris-

tian 'fundamentalism.'"⁸ Funny thing is, Christian fundamentalism is not being swept away!

The liberal media habitually publishes outright fabrications that overstate the influence of non-Christian groups in America. Figures do not lie, but the lying liberals do their best to figure out ways to deceive Americans. A stark example of this lack of honesty is the media's fondness of inflating the number of active, practicing Muslims in America. The press routinely "rounds up" one early estimate of eight million Muslims to ten or even twelve million. It fails to reveal that many Arab-Americans, especially those coming from Syria, Palestine, and Egypt, are Christian. Mosque attendance, the best indicator of the number of active Muslims, stands at only 1.5 million, with another 2 million inactive believers. By what formulations of new math does three-and-a-half million equal twelve million? Muslims, in fact, account for only about one percent of U.S. population. Although some Muslims represent a clear and present danger to the American internal security by virtue of their radicalism, their raw number of adherents is miniscule compared to the number of Southern

IN REVERSE ON FOR AMERICA

principle for his own good, Man's Creator emphasized acknowledgement of God's sovereignty. God has a right to choose what is good and what is bad for His human creation. God has a right to rule mankind. This is very forcefully summed up in these words from the Bible, book of Isaiah, 48:17: "I am the Lord your God who teaches you on what is best for you, who directs you on the way you should go."

Roberts then launches into a discussion of Adam and Eve, concluding that, "There is no alternative to obedience." The choice God gave Adam and Eve was really a choice about accepting God's sovereignty. He is careful to point out:

There are no circumstances under which one can ignore God's laws. The Bible puts it bluntly: "Do not be misled; God is not mocked. For whatever a man is sowing, this he will also reap," Galatians 6: 7 and 8. No bill of rights, constitution, statutory instrument, legalizing, legislating, cultural profiling, or religious decree, however enacted, can circumvent the Creator's law. Nothing but nothing can protect

one from the consequences of disregarding God's law.

He concludes:

As regards [the spread of] HIV/AIDS, nothing that mankind can do will reverse this trend. The only way this can be redressed is by making meaningful changes by allowing space for God's laws, word and principles, and coming to terms with and living by them, especially as regards morals. Only then can anyone sing about "fighting and conquering AIDS." We have no alternative. Anything else will be a waste of time and effort and end in utter disappointment!

It is not known whether George Roberts is a Gentile or an Israelite. That does not really matter. Nor is it known to what extent his opinions reflect those of the paper's editors or of the people of Zambia. What matters, though, is that his comments, which express an uncompromising acceptance of the Old Testament as binding in this day and age, were printed prominently in Zambia's leading newspaper, without editorial disclaimer.

WHAT—AND WHO— IS A SECULARIST?

A recent study asserts that a “religious gap” exists between American secularists and traditionalists.¹ Its authors define a “secularist” as an individual who rejects the authority of God’s Word, has no religious affiliation, does not pray or attend religious services, and finally, claims that religion grants him no guidance in his daily life. The authors define a “traditionalist” as an individual who takes exactly the opposite view.

The gap was first noticed in 1972, when more than 33% of the white delegates to the Democratic Presidential Convention claimed to be secularists, while only 5% of the general population fit into that category.

Since then, the gap has grown. Among white voters in the 1992, 1996, and 2000 presidential elections, the religious gap was more important than all other “demographic and social cleavages in the electorate.” It played a far greater role in determining the outcome of these elections than the so-called gender gap, and, believe it or not, was more significant than *any other* combination of differences (for example, in education, income, occupation, age, marital status, and regional grouping).

To see just how deeply rooted this gap has become, consider that, in the three presidential elections since 1992, white women on average gave Democrats 9% more of their vote than did white men. Nine percent does not a significant gap make.

However, “the average gap separating secularists and religious traditionalists in these same elections was 42 percentage points.” Now, 42% makes a statistically significant gap! Any campaign strategist worth his salt will pay attention to a gap of that size.

Since about 1990, the Democratic Party has provided a home for secularists. Secularists—those who lack any fear of God—almost universally register Democratic, while traditionalists increasingly tend to muster among Republicans. In fact, Bill Clinton captured 80% of the “anti-fundamentalist” vote in 1992; Al Gore captured 70% of that vote in 2000. This secularist/Democrat and traditionalist/Republican divide has become so entrenched that it is polarizing the two parties.

Over forty years ago Gerhard Lenski² asserted that religion would play a lasting role—if not a hegemonic one—in American political and cultural life. The liberals mocked. Are they laughing at the idea now? Probably not. For the evidence that Lenski was right is becoming overwhelming.

We can count on religion playing an increasing part in voter decisions and in the determining of public policy in this nation—the Supreme Court notwithstanding!

¹ Bolce, Louis and De Maio, Gerald, “Our Secularist Democratic Party,” *Public Interest*.

² Lenski, Gerhard E., *The Religious Factor*, Doubleday, 1961.

Christians from Latin America, Asia, and Africa, the majority of whom are at least nominally Christian.

Suppressing the facts does not change them. Broadcasting myths that exaggerate the importance of non-Christian groups while holding back the truth about current trends in American Christianity will not change reality. Yet, how many Americans believe the “strong delusion,” preached by those who, as the apostle Paul put it in Romans 1:18, “suppress the truth in unrighteousness”?

The appearance of Southern Christianity in America is an unintended consequence of the 1965 Immigration Reform Act. From the viewpoint of America’s secular elites, it is as unwelcome as it is unintended. Since 1965, Americans have witnessed an undeniable display of God’s sovereignty. God turned the tables on the Satan-inspired, godless social engineers who sought to dilute Christianity to

the point it would become insignificant, a statistical nonentity. God used their plan to modify immigration regulations so that He might accomplish His purposes.

What purposes? Next month, in the final part of this three-part series, we will consider why God is changing the face of Christianity in America through the influx of Southern Christians.

—Charles F. Whitaker

¹ Jenkins, Philip, “A New Religious America,” *First Things*, August/September, 2002, p. 25. Mr. Jenkins is Distinguished Professor of History and Religious Studies at Pennsylvania State University.

² *Ibid.*, p. 26.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

“And these signs will follow those who believe: In My name . . . they will take up serpents . . .”

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God” (Matthew 4:7). Certainly, Jesus knew that God’s angels were all about Him, but He also knew not to test God deliberately. Christ was quoting from Deuteronomy 6:16, where hundreds of years earlier, He Himself had said this very same thing to the Israelites.

A Promise

In Deuteronomy 5, through Moses, He had rehearsed to the children of Israel the Ten Commandments. Then, in chapter 6, He told them to “love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might” (verse 5). He further told them to teach God’s ways to their children, fear Him, stay away from other gods, and do “not tempt the LORD your God” (verses 7, 13-14, 16). As Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28 show, God’s blessings would flow to them if they were obedient—blessings that include the promise of protection.

The five children of John and Melinda Brown, mentioned earlier, did not have the Word of God diligently taught to them. The example their parents set for them was that of two people tempting God. After the parents’ deaths, a custody battle between the two sets of grandparents ensued. According to the Associated Press, February 12, 1999, a judge placed the youngsters, ages 4 to 12, into the joint custody of both sets of grandparents. The kids spend the school year with grandparents in Georgia and vacations with grandparents in Tennessee. The judge warned the grandparents to keep the children away from churches where serpents are handled—a necessary precaution since the paternal grandfather is a snake-handling preacher himself!

Did these well meaning but deceived people follow God’s Word? Did they speak of God and His law when sitting in their house, when walking by the way, when lying down,



and when rising up (see Deuteronomy 6:7)? Or, did they—albeit sincerely—tempt God?

In Luke 10:17, the seventy that Christ had sent out returned with great joy, amazed that even the demons had been subject to them. Jesus responds:

Behold, I give you the authority to trample on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy, and nothing shall by any means hurt you. Nevertheless do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rather rejoice because your names are written in heaven. (verses 19-20)

Protection is promised here, not a command to flaunt their God-given authority. He specifically instructs them “not [to] rejoice in this” because it was not of their doing, not a show of faith. It was God’s protection pure and simple.

The prophet Isaiah pens words of God similar to these in Isaiah 43:1-3, 5:

Fear not, for I have redeemed you; . . . you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through

the rivers, they shall not overflow you. When you walk through the fire, you shall not be burned, nor shall the flame scorch you. For I am the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior. . . . Fear not, for I am with you.

Throughout His Word, God has promised us His protection. He is especially watchful over those He has commissioned to carry out His work, as well as all those whom He has called to make a witness for Him. The Bible is full of examples of His power to deliver His servants from life-threatening situations.

However, He does not guarantee to cover our foolishness when we put ourselves into potentially dangerous situations. He abhors being tempted—tested—as if He needs to prove Himself and His power to us. Psalm 78 shows His distaste for the Israelites’ constant testing of Him in the wilderness. The last thing He desires is for members of His church to follow their example of unbelief (see Hebrews 3:7–4:2).

Trust your natural instincts on this one—snake-handling is not a Christian practice.

—Mike Ford

(continued from page 8)

behalf, be reconciled to God. For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him” (verses 20-21).

As the Offerer, Jesus brought Himself, as it were, to God’s altar, and then offered Himself before God as the sin offering. When He did that, our sins fell on His head as His responsibility, and He became sin personified. Our sins thus caused Him—for the first time in His life—to be cut off from God. Our sins, now His sins, caused Him to be judged, rejected, and slain, for the wages of sin is death.

No longer a sweet savor to God, He was cast out of the camp, that is, cast from God’s presence. With His judgment, justice was satisfied. Because He took our sins upon Him and justice has been satisfied, God has judged us in Him, and He can now forgive us. In this manner, God can legally meet the requirements of His law: that sin can be expiated only by death. Because we are judged in Christ and He has already been judged, we are also judged already and free and clear of sin.

This is a most encouraging truth to understand: There is no death penalty hanging over us! Because our sins were transferred to Him, Christ was the One rejected and put out of the camp. This fact was acted out in the course of the ritual of the sin offering: “But the bull’s hide and all its flesh, with its head and legs, its entrails and offal—the whole bull he shall carry outside the camp to a clean place, where the ashes are poured out, and burn it on wood with fire; where the ashes are poured out it shall be burned” (Leviticus 4:11-12).

At this point, it is good to consider a major aspect of Christ’s life and what it means to us. From the time recorded in Mark 1, when Jesus came into Galilee preaching the gospel, His life was 3½ years of trials of ever-increasing intensity. Though there were undoubtedly periods when He was relatively free of persecution, they nonetheless mounted toward a crescendo. It was especially so around Jerusalem, where those in power feared Him because, as they said, “Look, the world has gone after Him!” (John 12:19). John 7 shows that His own family did not believe in Him. Even of those closest to Him, the apostles, one betrayed Him outright, and the others abandoned Him out of fear for their own lives.

Through it all, we find in Him a story of undaunted courage. He gave every impression of being fearless and faithful to the *n*th degree.

He kept going forward wisely, discreetly, enduring whatever came upon Him in carrying out His mission. In the end He had to endure the taking away of his freedom; an unfair, illegal trial; conviction; scourging; and death.

While being crucified, He makes a telling statement by crying out, “My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?” (Matthew 27:46). Could it be that this provides insight into the only thing He feared—the loss of contact and communication with His Father—and that He did not know what He would do then?

We need to consider this deeply and appreciatively because this is the great gift made available to us by Christ’s sacrifice. Fellowship with God, being at peace with Him, and having access to Him are admittance to the very fountain of living waters. We can safely say that, once our sins are covered by Christ’s blood, access to God is the source of all spiritual strength and growth because the love of God is poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit given to us (Romans 5:1-5).

Hebrews 13:10 tells us, “We have an altar from which those who serve the tabernacle have no right to eat.” This altar is God’s table. We are fed spiritual food from this spiritual altar. Jesus said in John 6:63, “The words I speak to you are spirit, and they are life.” The priests were permitted to eat of the peace, sin, and trespass offerings. Thus those who serve at the altar are fed at the altar. We are now part of a spiritual priesthood. It is our responsibility to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God by Jesus Christ (I Peter 2:5).

Hebrews 13:11-12 concludes, “For the bodies of those beasts, whose blood is brought into the sanctuary by the high priest for sin, are burned outside the camp. Therefore Jesus also, that He might sanctify the people with His own blood, suffered outside the gate.” God will not budge one inch with His law even when the sinner is His own Creator Son. Is sin serious to us? Do we appreciate the sacrifice of Christ?

Long before His actual sacrifice, God laid the groundwork of instruction in Leviticus so we would thoroughly understand and truly appreciate what has been done to provide us, so pitifully weak and undeserving, access to Him to receive forgiveness and strength.

In Christian love,



My God, My God,
why have You
forsaken Me?
—Matthew 27:46

Therefore Jesus
also, that He might
sanctify the people
with His own blood,
suffered outside
the gate.
—Hebrews 13:12

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THE UNITED NATIONS

Contrary to popular opinion, the United Nations is not the knight in shining armor it pretends to be. According to a review by Steve Farrell of *Inside the United Nations: A Critical Look at the UN* by Steve Bonta, it was founded on the Utopian belief that a sovereign human world government could usher in a millennium of peace and freedom. The UN began with a semi-secret meeting between officials from Britain, the Roosevelt administration, and representatives of the Stalinist regime, while Congress and the media were excluded.

The UN was never intended to be a peace organization, though. Constitutional authority J. Reuben Clark, Jr. observed at the time of the drafting of the Charter: "The Charter is a war document not a peace document. . . . [It] makes us a party to every international dispute arising anywhere in the world." He predicted the UN "[will] not prevent future wars, [but make] it practically certain that we shall have future wars." It would do something else as well: "[A]s to such wars, it takes from us the power to declare them, to choose the side on which we shall fight, to determine what forces and military equipment we shall use in the war, and to control and command our sons who do the fighting." In other words,

the real purpose of the UN was to exploit incessant, orchestrated cries to "keep the peace," to "save the environment," to "free the indigenous peoples," and to "feed the poor" in order to erode national sovereignty and impose global government over a disarmed world.

Several points in the UN Charter outline the infrastructure this global government rests on:

- 1) There is no true representation at the UN; all the officials are appointed, not elected.
- 2) There is no separation of powers,

or checks and balances; all power, legislative, executive, and even judicial, resides in a worldwide Security Council of 15 individuals (five of whom possess absolute veto power).

- 3) There is no limited government; the Charter outlines all of its powers in sweeping, vague, open-ended language.
- 4) There are no God-given inalienable rights; every human right is subject to revocation when exercised inconsistent with the purposes and principles of the UN Charter.

Global Religion

UPI reports that at the next meeting of the General Assembly of the United Nations in September, President Gloria Arroyo of the Philippines will present a formal proposal for the establishment of an Interreligious Council at the world body. It would be an institutional part of the United Nations, with status like that of the U.N.'s Economic and Social Council or the Trusteeship Council.

The speaker of the Philippines House of Representatives, Jose de Venecia, has waged a campaign for such a religious infusion into the

work of the United Nations. "We in the Philippines feel that President Bush should try and avert the confrontation with the Muslim world that seems to threaten. And while the really grievous need is for a global Christian-Muslim dialog, the effort must also encompass Buddhists, Hindus, Confucians, and Jews, heads of churches, temples, synagogues and mosques, political leaders as well as representatives of global civil society."

The proposal for an Interreligious Council to become a formal part of the U.N. structure is ambitious and new, and de Venecia has put his energies behind the task of winning political support through his connections with "Christian Democrat" parties around the world—particularly in Europe.

U.S. PLAN TO "OWN" SPACE



The U.S. Air Force Space Command's Strategic Master Plan (SMP) is a clear statement of the U.S.'s intention to dominate the world by turning space into the crucial battlefield of

the 21st century, Scotland's *Sunday Herald* reports. The document details how Space Command is developing, as its primary goal, new weapons, warheads, and spacecraft to allow the U.S. to hit any target on earth within seconds. The use of "space power" would also let the U.S. deploy military might instantaneously across the face of the earth and completely "bypass adversary defenses."

However, in order to "fully exploit and control space," Space Command must "negate" the ability of foreign powers to develop their own space capabilities. The SMP reveals U.S. fears of advances in space technol-

ogy among other nations—including its European allies. "Space capabilities are proliferating internationally," it says, "a trend that can reduce the advantages we currently enjoy." It specifically names the European Galileo satellite system.

The rush to militarize space will likely see domestic laws and foreign agreements torn up. As the document warns: "To fully develop and exploit [space] . . . some U.S. policies and international treaties may need to be reviewed and modified." The conclusion of the SMP report leaves no doubt of how important these plans are to the U.S. military and government: "Expanding the role of space in future conflicts . . . produces a fully integrated air and space force that is persuasive in peace, decisive in war, and pre-eminent in any form of conflict."

NEWS AND TRENDS Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour when the Son of Man is coming. (Matthew 25:13)

BIBLE STUDY: THE PARABLE OF THE PERSISTENT FRIEND

Jesus taught by example, and this is particularly true in terms of prayer. Once, after He was finished praying, His disciples asked Him to show them how to pray (Luke 11:1-4). He responded by giving them an outline of what to include in a typical prayer. Then, after having taught His disciples to pray, Jesus furthers His instruction through the Parable of the Persistent Friend (verses 5-13), which pictures persistence and perseverance in prayer.

The parable includes three friends. A *visiting friend* had traveled for many hours to where he thought he would be offered food and shelter, but he had none, since his host's family had already eaten and retired to bed for the evening. Custom, however, dictated that the weary traveler be provided food. Not wanting to neglect his friend even though it was late, the host, a *persistent friend*, went to a *sleeping friend's* house nearby to ask for bread.



1. Who is the ultimate source of help? Luke 11:5-7; Ecclesiastes 4:9-12; Psalm 121:1-8; 86:15; Ephesians 3:20; I Timothy 1:14-16.
COMMENT: The sleeping friend, awakened by his persistent friend, was irritated to be bothered so late at night. He flat out refused to give him any bread for his visiting friend, lest his sleeping wife and children be disturbed. He probably reasoned it would be better for one person to fast until morning than for his whole family to be disturbed at midnight. However, the persistent friend continued knocking, threatening to wake not only the whole family, but the whole neighborhood as well! So he got out of bed and gave his friend some bread—but not out of friendship. He gave in to persistence. A friend is a fine source of aid, but God the Father and Jesus Christ are our spiritual friends—our greatest friends. They give grace, mercy, and truth abundantly.

2. How often should we go to God in prayer for something? Luke 11:8; 18:1-8; Romans 15:30; II Corinthians 12:8-10.

COMMENT: People often give because a request is “repeated.” The requester cannot allow himself to become discouraged merely because his first or second request is denied. He must be persistent. The Greek word translated as “persistence” means “shameless,” suggesting freedom from the bashfulness that would stop a person from asking a second time. Knocking once does not indicate perseverance, but “continued” knocking does.

God often answers us after long and persevering requests. He hears prayers and grants blessings long after they appear to be unanswered or withheld. He does not promise to give blessings immediately. He promises only that He will do it according to His will and plan. Although He promises to answer the prayer of the faithful, often He requires us to wait a long time to try our faith. He may allow us to persevere for months or years, until we are completely dependent on Him, until we see that there is no other way to receive the blessing, and until we are prepared to receive it. Sometimes, we are not ready to receive a blessing when we first ask. We may be too proud, or we may not comprehend our dependence upon Him. Maybe we would not value it, or the timing for it may simply be wrong. If what we ask for is good and accords with God's will, He will give it at the best time possible.

3. What must we persistently do in prayer? Luke 11:9-10; Hebrews 4:16; 11:6; James 1:5-8;; 4:3; 5:15-17; I John 3:22; 5:14-15.

COMMENT: First, we must humbly *ask* according to His will, not our own pleasures. If something we ask for is contrary to God's plan, no amount of persistence will force Him to give in. When requesting anything of God, most people often stop asking when He does not immediately intervene. Human nature is easily discouraged because it thinks on a physical plane, but with God all things are possible. We need to be optimistic that God has heard and will respond in a good and faithful manner.

Second, we must *seek* to know our true motives and God's will regarding the request. We seek to find out what we must do to bolster our faith with works. Do God's promises include the blessing we ask for?

Third, we must *knock*. We must persevere, be persistent, pressing the matter until we receive it. We should faithfully go to God repeatedly, until He responds to our prayers and grants what we ask of Him—if it is according to His will.

4. Does God answer our prayers reluctantly? Luke 11:11-13; Psalm 86:1-7, 15-17; 103:13; Isaiah 49:15; Jonah 4:2; Matthew 6:30-33; II John 3.

COMMENT: The sleeping friend had to be awakened and pestered into lending the bread, but God does not sleep and is never disturbed when we approach Him. We do not have to force Him into giving because He never gives reluctantly; giving is a major part of His nature. Although God is generous, we should pray perseveringly as David did, not being afraid to ask repeatedly according to His will.

The intensity God desires in our prayers is emphasized by the admonishment to “ask, seek, knock.” All asking is not considered seeking, but only patient and persistent asking. All seeking is not considered looking in the right place, but only seeking the truth. All knocking is not considered attention getting, but only energetic and persistent knocking. The threefold admonition is in itself an admonition to ask diligently, repeatedly, and long-sufferingly. By this parable Christ exhorts us to be patient, persevering, and persistent in prayer. If the persistent friend who sought the bread for his visiting friend was not discouraged by a negative response but continued to ask earnestly, how much more diligent should we be in beseeching God who willingly and abundantly gives? God does not answer our diligent prayers to be rid of us but because He loves us.