

#77, The Ball and Chain of Biblical Literalism

By Rev. Alvin Petty, retired area minister

The great scientists of the 15th and 16th centuries shared John Calvin's view that scientific progress in all fields should be regarded as religious activity. Unfortunately, not all in the church shared Calvin's enlightened view. This was the beginning of modernity for the church and its use of the Bible. The part of the church which reacted to scientific progress, with worried biblical literalism, set a bad pattern, which many still follow.

Nicolas Copernicus (1473-1543) regarded science as more divine than human. His sun-centered solar system (heliocentric) hypothesis was so radical that few people could take it in. Instead of the earth's and man's being the center of the universe, as had been commonly thought, they were just one of many planets rotating around one of many stars. What they thought was a stable world was actually always in rapid motion.

The biblical literalists failed to realize from their perch of religious superiority that God's spiritual path we are to walk in has only one constant, change. To make progress in God's way

of life, we must be open to change in our understanding of the Bible and science. To neglect science proven findings makes us look foolish in representing Christ. We must go with the flow of new knowledge, which is proven, and change our biblical interpretations to match the new insights.

Galileo Galilli (1564-1642) tested the Copernican theory by observing the planets through his telescope. He was silenced by the inquisition and forced to recant, but his uncooperative aggression and provocative temperament contributed also to his condemnation.

At first Catholics and Protestants did not automatically reject the new science. The Pope accepted Copernicus's theory when he first presented it at the Vatican. And the early Calvinists and Jesuits were very keen on the new science.

But many were upset by the new theories and questioned: How would you reconcile Copernicus's theory with their literal reading of Genesis? If, as Galileo suggested, there was life on the moon, how had these people descended from Adam? How could the revolutions of the earth be squared with Christ's ascension to heaven? Biblical literalism leads to these kinds of silly questions.

Many opposed the Copernican theory because it made them feel small and insignificant, man and the Church were not the center of the universe. But humility is the source of great-

ness. We need to realize our interconnectedness with God, others and the universe. We are small, but we are a beloved part of the great whole. The Divine Spirit of the universe is in us and flows through us. So though humble, we are very significant because of the whole we are connected to.

#78, Strange Things Come From Literalism

By Alvin Petty

When science began its 15th and 16th century rise, the church's use of the Bible was not prepared to embrace modern science as a friend in many cases. Modernity had produced an increasing emphasis on the literal meaning of scripture. The bias of early modern thought required people to see truth as conforming to the laws of the external world. But there is no way to read all of the Bible as literal history and conform to this modern attitude. If the church had held on to the old allegorical method of interpreting scripture, it would have coped much better with their changing world. It could have allegorized the difficult and miraculous parts of the Bible and made them fit the emerging new scientific theories on the natural world. This would have been much healthier than retreating from science and working so hard in the centuries ahead to prove the literal historical actuality of every piece of scripture, as much of the church has tried to do.

The high end educated theologians have been very sensible and never done this, but theologians on the lower end of education, which is the majority, often have. An example today is the fundamentalist American church, which spends hundreds of thousands of dollars every year, trying to prove the literal historicity of Genesis 1 and disprove evolution. Me thinks there is not too much intelligent design in modern evangelical churches.

Seeking to understand the literal plain sense of the words of

scripture is good scholarship, but taking every story of scripture as literal history is a wrong approach. The healthier religious way is to realize that the Bible, like all sacred texts in all religions, is built upon a framework of legend and myth, which teach great truths, but are not literally true stories.

But only the more theologically trained segment of the church is willing to acknowledge and understand the above fact. When one does not deal honestly with legend and myth of the Bible, strange things can arise. Also, not noticing the if factor or contingency factor in all prophecy leads to weird prophetic interpretation. This is the "if they repent and do right" factor for the recipients of the prophecy. If they do not, the prophecy is invalidated. The New Testament interprets such Old Testament prophecies of Israel as being all fulfilled in Jesus Christ who is the faithful Israel.

But many believe these prophecies will be fulfilled literally for Israel in the near future. This segment of the American church is a good sized voting block, which puts pressure on our foreign policy towards the Middle East. But someone needs to tell these folks and Israel that Israel is not the 51st state of our nation, and they do not always have our best interests at heart.

Biblical literalism among the conservative orthodox Jews leads to arrogance and hatefulness toward the Palestinians. Many of the non-religious youth of Israel share this hateful attitude, thinking that they should just kill them all and get them out of the way. This is by no means all Israelis' thinking. But you would think the conservative, hateful segment would know better, of all people, because the haters sound to me like the Nazis did toward the Jews.

Extreme literalism always contributes much to this kind of unholy mess.

#79, A Strange New Myth

By Alvin Petty, retired area minister

When much of the church in the 15th and 16th century was reacting to the rise of modern science with biblical literalism, a group of Jews in their great distress and displacement created a strange new myth from the Bible that helped them to survive and it became a fervent form of spirituality.

These Jews had not yet succumbed for the enthusiasm of the literal reading of the Bible. In 1492 they suffered a disaster which made many turn to the mystical consolation of Kabbalah.

In 1492, Ferdinand and Isabella, Catholic monarchs of Aragon and Castille had conquered the Kingdom of Grenada, the last Muslim stronghold in Western Europe. Then Muslims and Jews were given the choice of conversion or deportation. Some converted but many Jews went into exile in the new Ottoman Empire. A good number went to live in Palestine which was a new Ottoman Province.

A saintly Jewish mystic, Isaac Luria, settled in Safed in Northern Galilee and created a Kabbalistic myth of creation that had nothing in common with Genesis 1. But it spoke to the Jews' suffering and displacement and so gave them something positive to do with a sense of redemptive purpose that by the mid sixteen hundreds Lurianic Kabbalah had a mass following in Jewish communities from Poland to Iran.

The Jews had been preoccupied with the idea of exile since they had been exiled to Babylon for nearly 50 years in 586-539 BCE. For these Spanish Jews, the Sephardim, the loss of their homeland in Spain was their worst disaster since the destruction of their temple in 586 BCE. They had been jerked out of their home that was filled with continued to Page 13

Periodicals postage paid at Hart, Texas 79043. Publication No. 025-016.

Mailing address to which undeliverable copies or change of address notices are to be sent to:

The Pulse
P.O. Box 350
Hart, Texas 79043

Failure of the subscriber to notify change of address will result in corresponding loss of subscription time.

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Weather

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U.S. Weather Observer

	Hi	Lo	Pr
Thursday	86	56	.54
Friday	84	57	.45
Saturday	69	53	1.01
Sunday	72	52	1.21
Monday	70	52	.71
Tuesday	67	51	.51
Wednesday	79	52	
March moisture.....	0.35		
April moisture.....	0.51		
May moisture.....	4.43		
2014 moisture.....	4.94		
2013 moisture.....	3.14		