

SNAKE-HANDLER SUCCUMBS TO BITE

One of the prominent leaders of snake-handling churches in the Southeast died Oct. 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, Tenn., was preaching with his own 3-foot-long timber rattler in hand when the reptile sank one fang into his finger.

According to a *Knoxville News-Sentinel* report, eyewitnesses from the congregation said that after being bitten, the 34-year-old evangelist "emerged from behind the pulpit, stepped down onto the church floor and toppled over." Church officials immediately phoned for a medical team, but Brown died just 10 minutes after being bitten. Some members of Brown's family have offered that his death may have been the result of a heart attack.

Brown, who began handling snakes in worship services at age 17, had been bitten 22 other times before the fatal bite. Three years ago, his wife, Melinda, died after being also bitten by a timber rattler during a church service at the Full Gospel Tabernacle in Jesus' Name Church in Middlesboro, Ky.

According to the *News-Sentinel* report, "It is a misdemeanor in Tennessee and Kentucky to endanger others with a deadly animal in a church service."

Those espousing the snake-handling religion base their belief on the often-disputed concluding verses of the 16th chapter of Mark's gospel.

—MKG

MARIAN APPARITIONS IN GEORGIA TO END

The Virgin Mary was alive and well and living — or at least appearing — in the state of Georgia. That's what a group of 100,000 people believed. The crowd gathered in Conyers, a town about 30 miles east of Atlanta, in mid-October to receive a message from the Virgin Mary. The revelations are delivered through Nancy Fowler, a woman who claims to have had reoccurring visitations since 1990 from the mother of Jesus Christ.

Fowler alleges that Mary began appearing to her in October 1990 and gave her messages on the 13th of each month. The monthly apparitions lasted through May

1994, when Fowler announced the visitations would be reduced to an annual event each Oct. 13. In 1997, Fowler said that the October 1998 message would be the last public declaration from the Virgin Mary delivered through her. She did not specify as to why the visions were stopping.

Fowler, reading from handwritten notes, presented generic messages to her audience. "If you are worried about the future, put not your attention to those matters. The future holds no concern to those who truly seek God and love him and remain in his favor," she announced. Also during the 30-minute message she claimed that her final vision included a multitude of souls accompanying the Virgin Mary, which were supposedly released from purgatory into heaven in Mary's honor.

Roman Catholic officials from Fowler's area have not sanctioned the apparitions.

—MKG

CONVENTION MARKS 20TH ANNIVERSARY

The Witnesses Now for Jesus Convention held its 20th gathering Oct. 23-25 at Blue Mountain Christian Retreat in the Pocono Mountains of Pennsylvania.

From humble beginnings in 1979, the convention has been a consistent source of counsel, support and encouragement for people whose lives have been torn apart by the Watchtower Society. During the past two decades, help to Jehovah's Witnesses who desire to break free from the organization and to families who have lost loved ones to the sect have been a primary focus of the meetings. The three-day conventions are filled with doctrinal teaching, examinations of Jehovah's Witness doctrine and practice, and testimonies by those who have made their exodus from the Watchtower and have found true salvation through Jesus Christ.

The convention was started by Bill and Joan Cetnar as a way for former Jehovah's Witnesses, family members of current Jehovah's Witnesses, and apologetic ministries to interact and network. Bill served on Personal Freedom Outreach's board of directors from 1984 until 1991 when he went home to be with the Lord. Since Bill's passing, Joan has served as a PFO director and continues to host the conventions.

The first convention was held in October 1979. Dr.
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that while he is “not a follower or supporter of Joyce,” “Jesus is coming back soon for his bride, hopefully soon but if not, I do hope there are teachers like Joyce Meyer still teaching the Word, even some of her life experiences, *because in my spirit, I really sense that she is called of God...*” (emphasis added).

Here, too, this brother has — whether knowingly or unknowingly — weakened the Word of God in his life. He is on mystical and dangerous ground when he wrote that “in my spirit, I sense that she is called of God.” He has allowed his senses and emotions to do something that the Word of God is to do. The Bible is the *only standard* by which we are to measure all teachers and their teachings, not our senses or emotions.

So then what’s an apologist to do? Well, the answer is obvious: Just keep on presenting the facts and remembering that unchecked doctrine can and does affect the lives of those following such teachers. And by God’s grace some will listen and consider the facts.

A lady from Ohio proves this beyond question. She first wrote to PFO to protest against our reports on Benny Hinn. She accused us of “jealousy” and labeled our writing as “disgusting.” We were told by her that we need to “get born-again.” I responded to her, reiterated the information in our articles, and asked her to please consider the Scriptural instruction and response for false teachers and false prophets (such as Romans 16:17-18; 1 Thessalonians 5:21; 2 Timothy 4:3-4; Titus 1:9 and Jude 3).

This she did, and her harsh rebukes were immediately replaced by a kindhearted and positive attitude. “I must ask you to forgive me, I’m sorry, there are things I wrote that I shouldn’t have,” she said in a subsequent letter. And later wrote that, “After corresponding with you, I have been watching him [Benny Hinn] closer and as hard as it is for me to say, I don’t like some of the things I see.” She then acknowledged that she no longer sees PFO as “intent on getting at Benny Hinn, but honestly ... trying to protect the ‘body of Christ.’”

In one of her letters (which arrived just before this editorial was written), she asked me to “Please pray for me that I will grow in wisdom, knowledge and discernment.” What a humbling petition from a sister in Christ! Her prayer requests are some of the noblest for which a Christian can petition God. In an arena where the devotees of televangelists are prompted to seek from God more money, better jobs, bigger homes, newer cars and other grandiose “blessings,” it’s exhilarating to hear someone search for the things that matter. I know God will honor her requests as she considers her conduct, character and spiritual growth more important than materialism.

Her prayer, too, is much more in line with the instruction of God’s Word: “The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up

against the knowledge of God and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ” (2 Corinthians 10:4-5).

Despite the accusations that we are “jealous,” “envious” or “just plain old stupid” by some, my colleagues and I will continue to hold fast and defend the faith. We will continue to evaluate and speak out against those who promote aberrant and heretical teachings. And by God’s grace there will be those who will be open to, ascertain, and become unconfused by the facts.

—MKG

NEWS UPDATES

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Julius R. Mantey, Dr. Robert Morey and Dr. Jerry Bergman were among the featured speakers. During the final years of his life, Dr. Mantey, a noted authority and professor of New Testament Greek, became a renowned and outspoken critic of the Jehovah’s Witnesses and their translation of the New Testament. The Watchtower had misrepresented Dr. Mantey’s writings on Greek grammar in its effort to undermine the deity of Christ.

During the recently held convention, a plaque commemorating the milestone event was presented to Joan on behalf of fellow directors of PFO and the numerous lives that have been impacted by her diligence in hosting the annual gathering.

The crowning event of the 20th convention was a live taping of a six-program series on Jehovah’s Witnesses by *The John Ankerberg Show*. The guests for Ankerberg’s shows included Joan Cetnar, Lorri MacGregor, Duane Magnani and David Reed, all former Jehovah’s Witnesses.

—MKG

HOLYFIELD’S GREATEST OPPONENT NOT IN THE BOXING RING

During the past decade, Evander Holyfield has been a celebrated star in professional boxing arenas. His name and achievements will be indelibly recorded in boxing history books. Following his appearance at a Benny Hinn Miracle Crusade in Philadelphia, the three-time heavyweight champion’s prominence among Christians escalated as well. At the June 1994 crusade, Hinn claimed God was healing Holyfield’s heart of an alleged condition that forced him into early retirement. After his solidarity with the faith healer, Holyfield began to appear on the Trinity Broadcasting Network, and at