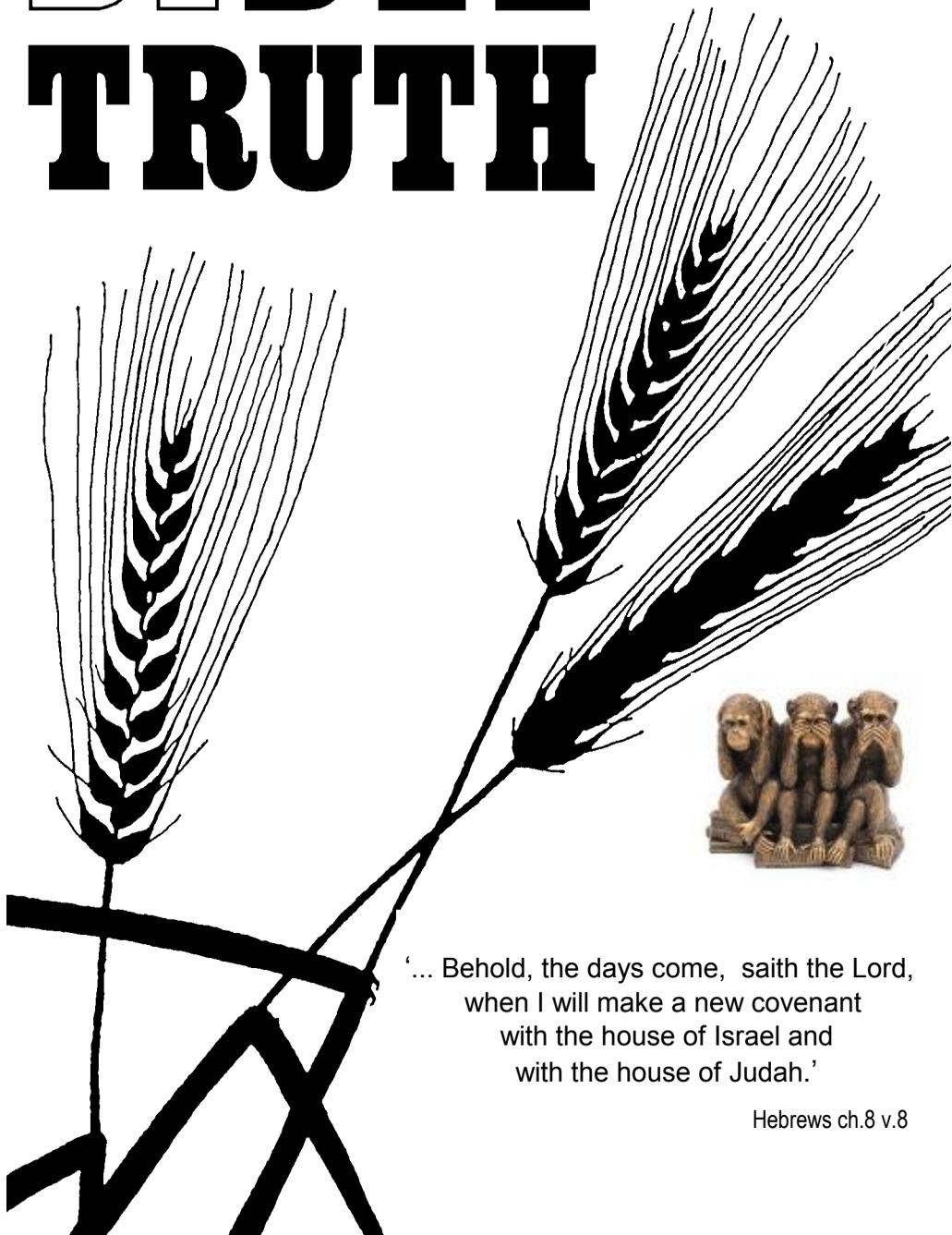


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'... Behold, the days come, saith the Lord,
when I will make a new covenant
with the house of Israel and
with the house of Judah.'

Hebrews ch.8 v.8

STARK PRAYER SPARKS AN ABSOLUTE POLITICAL FUROR

by Marc Fisher

Taken from the *Washington Post* 20th May, 1996
(Editor's note, some reports say this was 23 January 1996)

A member of the Reverend Joe Wright's flock who happens to be a Kansas state legislator called the minister at home in Wichita with a proposal: 'If you're going to be at the state capitol tomorrow, why don't you honour us by delivering the opening prayer?'

Normally, Wright doesn't put his prayers on paper, but since the legislature required a written copy, the minister sat down that evening to jot a few lines.

That was in January. Since then, the prayer Wright wrote in thirty minutes has sparked angry walkouts in two state legislatures, an unprecedented two readings on Paul Harvey's ABC Radio newscast, more than 6,500 phone calls to Wright's church and so many boxes of mail that the church staff does not know where to put them anymore. Wright says the prayer has been reprinted in hundreds of church newsletters and other publications, read from pulpits in every state of the nation and broadcast on more radio shows than he can count.

This was no innocuous ecumenical invocation.

This was a statement of absolutes.

'Heavenly Father, we come before You today to ask your forgiveness and seek your direction and guidance. We know your word says, "Woe to those who call evil good", but that's exactly what we've done. We have lost our spiritual equilibrium and inverted our values. We confess that we have ridiculed the absolute truth of your word and called it moral pluralism. We have worshiped other gods and called it multiculturalism. We have endorsed perversion and called it an alternative lifestyle.'

Even at that first reading in Topeka, legislators were stirring, gasping, stalking out of the chamber.

'He didn't miss anyone', state Representative Jim Long told the *Kansas City Star*. 'He made everyone mad'.

Exactly right, the pastor says.

'I am a preacher at an evangelical church', says Wright. 'What else would they expect from me? I don't know if they were just looking for platitudes or a "To whom it may concern" kind of prayer. But there are absolutes, and God has called me to preach the truth. Naturally, any time you preach absolutes, you're going to offend some people'.

The prayer continues,

'We have exploited the poor and called it the lottery. We have neglected the needy and called it self-preservation. We have rewarded laziness and called it welfare'.

In Colorado last week, when state Representative Mark Paschall read Wright's prayer to his colleagues, liberal Democrats called the text 'racist' and 'divisive' and some conservative Republicans joined the walkout. Republican Representative Marcy Morrison called the prayer 'offensive, we give a letter to all ministers reminding them before they give prayers in the House chamber that this is an ecumenical group', she said last week. 'For Paschall to do this flies in the face of tradition.'

In both Kansas and Colorado, Wright's prayer has prompted moves to halt the practice of opening legislative sessions with a call to higher powers.

The prayer continues,

'We have killed our unborn and called it choice. We have shot abortionists and called it justifiable'.

His opponents have called Wright all the usual names one calls the religious right in American politics these days - extremist, intolerant and hate-filled. But Wright's history in Wichita doesn't quite fit those labels.

'I'm known as a loving fellow,' Wright says. 'I don't like conflicts.'

He has recruited members of his nearly all-white Central Christian Church to join with members of black churches in prayer patrols on the streets of gang-infested neighbourhoods.

In 1991, when more than 2,000 people were arrested in Wichita during 46 days of confrontational anti-abortion protests by Operation Rescue, Wright supported the blockade of clinics, but after the demonstrations ended he led a group of clergy who sought to lower the pitch of the public discourse. 'We want to see abortion stopped, but we don't want to polarise the community', Wright said then.

It turned out some months later, however, that Wright's church had helped extend the Operation Rescue protest by acting as the radical group's banker and bookkeeper, processing \$70,000 in contributions to help organisers pay the costs of their demonstrations.

Wright believes strongly that ministers should not shy away from political involvement. Pastors should 'be involved in the political process and speak out on the moral issues that affect the community', he says.

The prayer continues,

'We have neglected to discipline our children and called it building esteem. We have abused power and called it political savvy. We have coveted our neighbours' possessions and called it ambition. We have polluted the air with profanity and pornography and called it freedom of expression'.

On the first Sunday after the hoopla in the Kansas legislature, Wright stepped up to his pulpit and found himself staring into a standing ovation. Attendance at the 3,000-member Central Christian Church has jumped by 250 since Wright first read the prayer.

And while the walkouts in Kansas and Colorado grabbed headlines, the pastor quickly points out that when the prayer was delivered in the Utah and Nebraska legislatures, no one raised a stink.

'There's a great hunger now for absolutes', says Wright, 53, who has been at the Wichita church for nine years. 'The mainline denominations are dying because they have accepted the idea that everything is grey. The churches that are growing are the ones that are taking a position, that see the world in black-and-white'.

If the firestorm over the prayer dies down, Wright and his congregation will move on to their next big topic - presidential politics. The pastor says he doesn't tell his flock which candidate to support, but he's happy to reveal his own views.

Marc Fisher, a senior editor, writes about almost anything. He's been *The Post's* enterprise editor, local columnist and Berlin bureau chief, and he's covered politics, education, pop culture, and much else in three decades on the Metro, Style, National and Foreign desks.
