

April 17, 1997

(97-31)

In this issue:

- **HMB, Brotherhood workers learn of their fate with NAMB**
- **Seminary preaching professor joins Beeson school faculty**
- **Lobbyists spar over interpretation of SBC position on amendment**
- **Supreme Court weighs merits of reversing parochial aid case**
- **Expert terms New Age religion product of market-oriented faith**
- **Church has chance to help 'nation of users and abusers'**
- **Addiction a problem for all people, author says**

HMB, Brotherhood workers learn of their fate with NAMB

By Mark Wingfield

ATLANTA (ABP) -- Professional staff members at the Southern Baptist Home Mission Board and Brotherhood Commission are learning if they have new assignments with the North American Mission Board.

About 80 people were invited to attend a one-hour meeting April 16 in which they were offered positions in the new agency, to be created in June by a merger of the HMB, Brotherhood Commission and Radio & Television Commission.

Those 80 invitees included at least 11 Brotherhood Commission staffers, who were notified two days before and given airline tickets from Memphis, Tenn., to Atlanta to attend the meeting.

The afternoon meeting was preceded by a morning chapel service in which Tennessee pastor Adrian Rogers spoke about the dangers of "murmuring against leaders."

About 50 professional staff members from the HMB have not been offered positions with NAMB. Of those, a few are retiring but most remain in limbo.

According to HMB spokesman Martin King, some of those as yet uninformed could be alternate choices for positions that have been offered to someone else first.

"We have been told there is a large group of people who are alternates for positions," King explained. "So they're making offers first to these people who were in the meeting yesterday. We've been told they have alternates for every position."

In addition to the 80 existing HMB and Brotherhood staff members already offered jobs, the implementation task force overseeing creation of the new agency reportedly is offering jobs to about 40 people not presently working for one of the existing agencies.

Existing staff members offered positions have five days to accept or reject the offers. Apparently, no professional staff members offered new positions will qualify for severance benefits if they reject the jobs offered. Severance benefits are available only to those terminated or those offered positions at a reduced pay level. Those

attending the April 16 meeting were told no one in that group would receive a reduced salary, even if the new position offered is at a lower level than the person's current position.

While some employees were offered positions similar to their current positions, others were assigned to entirely different areas. Some HMB employees described the effect as "fruit-basket turnover."

Likewise, some work units appear barely changed while others will see extensive staff changes.

For example, the HMB's chaplaincy division, which will become a sub-unit of a new ministry evangelism division, lost only one of its five professional staff positions; the remaining four will be filled by those currently holding similar positions.

On the other hand, while the HMB's associational missions division will have an expanded number of positions in the new structure, only two of the division's five professional staffers were offered positions April 16.

The new mission board's flagship magazine apparently will be produced by someone other than the existing staffs of the HMB's MissionsUSA, the Brotherhood Commission's MissionsToday or the RTVC's Beam magazines. None of the editors of those magazines was offered a position April 16.

Those directing staff selection for the new agency changed procedures for dealing with professional staff members after meeting with HMB support staff members one-on-one to tell them if they would be offered jobs in the new agency.

No figures have been released on the total number of HMB support staff members terminated or offered new jobs, but by the end of the first week of notifications, 59 had been offered new jobs and 39 had been terminated.

The new agency will employ about 165 fewer people than the three agencies combined currently employ.

An implementation task force appointed by the Southern Baptist Convention Executive Committee has been overseeing creation of the new mission board. That task force has held all its meetings behind closed doors and has communicated with Southern Baptists only through periodic pre-approved news releases issued through Baptist Press.

A sub-group of the task force, composed of John Yarborough of Georgia, Bill Hogue of California and Mike Hamlet of South Carolina, has been handling personnel matters.

Yarborough, who chairs the task force, could not be reached for comment on the staffing process.

Those expected to become trustees of the new mission board in June will meet in Atlanta April 24, where they presumably will hear a report from the committee appointed to nominate a NAMB president. The nominee is expected to be Bob Reccord, pastor of First Baptist Church of Norfolk, Va., and former chairman of the implementation task force.

Sometime after his nomination, Reccord presumably will announce his choices to fill five vice-president positions in the new structure. However, Reccord will have no authority to officially appoint anyone until the NAMB trustee board is officially constituted June 19 and his own nomination is considered.

-30-

-- With additional reporting by David Winfrey

Seminary preaching professor joins Beeson school faculty

BIRMINGHAM, Ala. (ABP) -- Robert Smith has been named professor of preaching at Samford University's Beeson Divinity School, officials at the school in Birmingham, Ala., have announced. He begins teaching this fall.

Smith is currently on the faculty of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky. Previously, he was a pastor for 20 years at New Mission Missionary Baptist Church in Cincinnati.

Dean Timothy George said Smith's addition to the Beeson faculty "brings great strength in the area of homiletics, a crucial part of the curriculum for a school charged 'to train pastors who can preach.'"

The Beeson School was founded in 1988 with a bequest by a Birmingham philanthropist to establish an ecumenical, evangelical divinity school at the Baptist university. Currently the school enrolls 225 students in three degree programs.

-30-

-- By ABP staff

Lobbyists spar over interpretation of SBC position on amendment

By Bob Allen and Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Lobbyists for competing proposals before Congress to bolster religious freedom in the U.S. Constitution are sparring over what Southern Baptists have said on the issue.

The Southern Baptist Christian Life Commission wrote members of Congress opposing a "religious freedom" amendment proposed by Rep. Ernest Istook, R-Okla., and proposing its own text for a constitutional amendment.

Istook responded by writing members of Congress claiming that a 1995 SBC resolution, which he called "the only official Southern Baptist Convention position" on the issue, supports his proposal.

An Istook spokeswoman said the congressman believes the CLC "does not represent the views of the Southern Baptist Convention."

Richard Land, head of Southern Baptists' moral-concerns and religious-liberty agency, responded in Baptist Press that CLC staff members had a hand in drafting the 1995 resolution and thus have "a better understanding and grasp of what the resolution says and what the resolution means" than does Istook, a non-Baptist who was not involved in the process.

Now, a third party has entered the fray. In another letter to members of Congress, Baptist evangelist William Murray, son of atheist Madalyn Murray O'Hair, charged the CLC has no authority to speak for Southern Baptists.

Land's letter to Congress "purports to represent all Southern Baptists by a sly use of grammar," Murray charged. "Read the letter closely and one can see that he is representing only one small office of the Southern Baptist Convention."

"Be aware that the Southern Baptist Convention is not a singular organization as is say, the Catholic Church. Each church is independent with its own board," Murray advised. He added there is currently a "strong movement within the Southern Baptist Convention for a resolution supporting the Religious Freedom Amendment."

Land followed with another letter to members of Congress, responding that the CLC is authorized to communicate Southern Baptist concerns based on resolutions and the Baptist Faith and Message and that the agency's trustees had endorsed the staff's position on the proposed amendments.

Land said he doubts there is any "strong movement" in the SBC to support Istook's amendment, as Murray suggested. "On the contrary, we believe that when Southern Baptists are informed on this issue that the vast majority will agree with the Christian Life Commission's understanding of the (1995) resolution as being inconsistent with the objectives of the Istook proposal."

In the last Congress, two proposals to amend the constitution left amendment supporters split on which proposal to promote. Rep. Henry Hyde, R-Ill., offered an amendment which would have allowed religious groups to be eligible for public funds. Istook offered a proposal aimed more at protecting school-sponsored prayer.

Hyde did not reintroduce his amendment in the current Congress. Istook plans to introduce an amendment similar to his earlier proposal but with a new phrase, intended to appease Hyde supporters, that would bar government from denying a "benefit" on account of religion.

In his first letter to Congress, Land said the CLC agrees with Istook that a constitutional amendment "is necessary to repair the damage inflicted" on First Amendment rights "by over three decades of judicial prejudice and hostility."

Istook's amendment, however, goes too far, Land said, by replacing "one form of religious discrimination ... with another."

The CLC letter states that Istook's proposal would create a new right "for government to interfere in matters of conscience, according to the dictates of the majority."

Istook's proposal to secure the people's right to "acknowledge religious belief, heritage or tradition on public property" would create a new power by government to "acknowledge" religious belief, the CLC said.

The CLC supports softer language that would permit "government accommodation" of public expressions of religion.

The CLC also said Istook's proposal would allow direct government aid to parochial schools, which would violate a principle set forth in "The Baptist Faith and Message," a doctrinal statement approved by the SBC in 1963.

The CLC supports indirect aid to private and parochial schools through vouchers, saying a parental-choice system would get around the Baptist Faith and Message article saying the state "has no right to impose taxes for the support of any religion."

Another Baptist group disagrees, however. The Baptist Joint Committee's Brent Walker said vouchers "still result in what the Baptist Faith and Message condemns." He said the CLC is right in "lambasting" the Istook proposal but added that the CLC proposal is no better.

In summary, the CLC informed members of Congress that the "constitutional amendment proposed by Rep. Istook should gravely concern every Southern Baptist who takes seriously the article of faith on religious liberty in the Baptist Faith and Message."

Istook's proposal, which he unveiled at a March 24 news conference, reads: "To secure the people's right to acknowledge God: The right to pray or acknowledge religious belief, heritage or tradition on public property, including public schools, shall not be infringed. The government shall not compel joining in prayer, initiate or compose school prayers, discriminate against or deny a benefit on account of religion."

The CLC's proposed amendment to the Constitution would read: "In order to secure the right of the people to acknowledge and serve God, according to the dictates of conscience, neither the United States nor any state shall deny any person equal access to a benefit, or otherwise discriminate against any person on account of religious belief, exercise, or expression; nor shall the prohibition on laws respecting an establishment of religion be construed to require such discrimination or to prohibit government accommodation of religious heritage, belief, or exercise by the people, including the right of each student-initiated, student-led prayer in public schools. This amendment does not authorize government to compel, sponsor, or inhibit religious belief, expression, or exercise."

-30-

Supreme Court weighs merits of reversing parochial aid case

By Larry Chesser

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Lawyers are asking the U.S. Supreme Court to reverse a 1985 ruling in a case that legal experts say could redraw the constitutional boundary separating church and state.

In 1985, the Supreme Court ruled in *Aguilar vs. Felton* that using tax-paid teachers for remedial instruction at parochial schools violated the First Amendment by excessively entangling church and state.

In arguments April 15, lawyers for the New York City Board of Education and a group of parents contended the 1985 ruling is contradicted by subsequent decisions by the high court.

Five justices have openly criticized the reasoning behind the *Aguilar* ruling. Observers say, however, it is unclear whether the court will reverse the ruling or, as some religious groups have asked, make wholesale changes in the court's tests for determining what violates the First Amendment's ban against establishment of religion.

If the high court uses this case to redraw the line separating church and state, justices asked lawyers during oral arguments, where should it be drawn?

Acting Solicitor General Walter Dellinger acknowledged that a "bright line" does not exist but insisted that allowing remedial instruction at parochial schools should not violate the First Amendment.

Aguilar should be overruled, Dellinger said, because it is no longer consistent with the court's Establishment Clause decisions and it continues to impose burdens on religious school students.

New York Corporation Counsel Paul Crotty told justices the school district's proposal to provide on-site instruction is far short of the broad-based direct funding of religious schools banned by the First Amendment.

The program is limited to secular instruction and made available only to students who need it, Crotty said.

Stanley Geller, attorney for taxpayers opposed to on-site remedial instruction, asked justices to preserve *Aguilar* and said the line sought by his clients is clear.

"I don't believe religious school students have a free-exercise right to receive public funds," Geller said.

A decision is expected by the time the court concludes this term in June.

As usual, U.S. religious groups are taking opposite sides on the pending case.

In a friend-of-the-court brief, the Christian Legal Society argues the Supreme Court should reverse its 1985 ruling and rewrite rules to permit equal access to government-financed programs by religious and non-religious groups.

On the other side of the issue, the American Jewish Congress, the Baptist Joint Committee and others asked the high court to preserve its traditional church-state doctrines. The brief first argues that the high court should not allow the use of a rarely used procedural rule to reopen the 1985 case. Any revisiting of *Aguilar*, the brief argues, should be "narrow and limited."

Groups joining the CLS brief include the Southern Baptist Christian Life Commission, Gary Bauer's Family Research Council, Focus on the Family and the National Association of Evangelicals.

The CLS brief asks the high court to discard its often-criticized "Lemon" test for weighing church-state violations.

The three-pronged test, formulated in 1972, requires governmental actions to have a secular purpose, neither advance nor inhibit religion and avoid excessive entanglement with religion.

In its place, the brief proposes a four-part test that would deem governmental aid constitutional if:

- it serves a legitimate governmental purpose, such as education;
- it is allocated on the basis of neutral, secular criteria that neither favor nor disfavor religion;
- it is made available to a broad array of beneficiaries, both religious and secular, on a non-discriminatory basis; and

- any religious element is the result of the genuinely independent choices of individuals and families.

The CLS and other parties "believe the court should take the opportunity of this case to return to the principle of 'government impartiality, not animosity, towards religion,'" the brief states.

The AJC brief states that the groups involved "support the constitutional principle of separation between church and state" and also believe federal government should help provide special services for disadvantaged children.

The brief argues against reconsideration of *Aguilar* under procedural Rule 60 (b), a rarely used procedure that allows a court to relieve a party from a judgment if the judgment on which it was based "has been reversed or otherwise vacated, or it is no longer equitable that the judgment should have prospective application."

The AJC brief also urges the court to refuse to replace the long-used rule that the Establishment Clause bars financial aid to religious institutions with a rule of "equal funding of religious and secular institutions."

"Equal treatment of religious and secular causes is an element of the Establishment Clause, but it cannot be allowed to trump the central principle that informs the Clause," The AJC brief concludes. Under the constitution, it says, the government may provide "incidental financial aid" to religious instruction but not aid "which by its scope and predictability shifts the burden of funding" to taxpayers.

In addition to the BJC, other groups joining the AJC brief are the American Federation of Teachers, the American Jewish Committee, the Anti-defamation League, the Central Conference of American Rabbis, the National Education Association, the National Jewish Community Relations Advisory Council, People for the American Way and the Union of American Hebrew Congregations.

-30-

Expert terms New Age religion product of market-oriented faith

By Dan Martin

DALLAS (ABP) -- New Age religion, including movements like the Heaven's Gate cult, is "intellectual Velcro dragged across the great religious traditions of the world picking up odd bits of theological lint as it goes," said a Baptist expert on the subject.

Mark Thames, pastor of Lower Greenville Baptist Community in Dallas, gave the definition while discussing the Heaven's Gate mass suicide in late March.

Thirty-nine members of the cult -- including founder and leader Marshall Applewhite -- committed mass suicide in an effort to "shed their earthly containers" and move to a higher level of existence aboard a spaceship they believed to be following the Hale-Bopp comet.

According to news reports, the group had a religion made up of odd bits of Christianity, Judaism, Gnosticism, New Age religion and belief in UFOs and aliens.

Thames said he has heard the Heaven's Gate cult referred to as the "dark side of the New Age movement," but commented that "it is not so much that as it is the dark side of the entertainment-oriented, consumer-style Christianity so prevalent in America today."

Heaven's Gate actually is more an outgrowth of a "very American phenomenon, consumer-market religion," he said.

"Our consumer approach to religion means that we have sitting out on the shelf bits and pieces of all the different beliefs there are in the world. Some are in packets, but you can buy them separately, too," said Thames, an interfaith-witness associate for the Baptist General Convention of Texas.

"You can pick up a bit off the Christian shelf, and some off the Judaism shelf, and another part off the Hindu shelf," he continued. "You can make your own package to suit yourself depending on your personal preference, whether it be Celestine Prophecy, miracles, angels, nature, bits and pieces of the Bible," he said, adding that one news report compared concocting religion to making soup.

New Age religion, he added, is "America's global position married to a consumer-market mentality, married to postmodernism, which is the intellectual position that says no source of information has a privileged status, but that no source of information is excluded from consideration, either.

"In other words, any source of information may be truth, but no source of information is a privileged source of truth."

Thames quoted G.K. Chesterton, the British Christian author of the last century: 'The problem when people don't believe in God is not that they don't believe in anything, but that they will believe in anything.'

America today, he explained, is a market, and Americans tend to think in market terms. "Americans think of themselves as consumers, and they are consumers ... and religious services, religious ideas are just like other commodities.

"Many Americans today think of churches as religious-services providers, and that is why the mega churches are so popular. People like them for the same reasons they like Sam's (Clubs). They are big warehouses and they offer lots of services under one roof for people to pick from."

In times past, he explained, people had a "grid from their upbringing that helped them determine that some things are obviously nutso, and some things are clearly true. But the churches got lazy in their teaching function and we raised several generations of not only biblically illiterate but doctrinally illiterate people. Many of them cannot tell the counterfeit from the real bill.

"That is why our people are prey to anyone who comes along with a coherent, persuasive presentation of ideas. Our churches are highly susceptible to novelty, partly because we have never made tradition very interesting."

Churches have done "superficial things" like adding entertainment-oriented worship services and downplaying education, he said.

"In our day, the church has been so preoccupied with minor distinctions within and among themselves that they have not adequately articulated the difference between us and the larger culture," Thames added.

America today is a mission field, Thames said. "We are not a mission field because Sri Lankans and Indonesians and Guatemalans are coming to America. We are a mission field because American culture is not Christian."

Churches without a doctrinal sense or a biblical base contribute to the growth of New Age beliefs, he said, particularly when they offer courses in the Celestine Prophecy, miracles, pop psychology, angels and things like that.

"The problem is not so much that there are people out there like Applewhite with loony beliefs, but that there are so many people in the churches who have no doctrinal moorings or biblical base to provide an anchor of authority for them," he said. "The problem is that there are many people in the churches with syncretistic, idiosyncratic belief systems picked and chosen in bits and pieces from the shelves of America's consumer market of religious belief."

The New Age movement is "a very American phenomenon," Thames said. For most of the world, New Age is not appealing because "evil is so obvious."

"The New Age is a spoiled and pampered way of looking at life, and it can only exist in a spoiled and pampered society," he said.

Despite the downside of the New Age, there are "tremendous opportunities if we will construct a post-modern Christianity that blends science, mystery, history, philosophy and all of those things in an exciting way" which will touch the lives of people, Thames said.

"We have an opportunity we haven't had in decades to talk about sin, the Bible, God and Jesus," he said.

-30-

Church has chance to help 'nation of users and abusers'

By Lacy Thompson

NEW ORLEANS (ABP) -- America is "a nation of users and abusers," says Charles Holmes, director of the alcohol drug education rehabilitation program at the Brantley Baptist Center in New Orleans. "And the church has a unique chance to help in that area."

The free fall to an addicted society began after World War II, when several factors converged, Holmes said. He outlined those during a recent conference on addictions at New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary.

For one thing, fathers became determined that their children would not have to go through what they did -- and they worked to ensure that. But in the process, they took away much of the sense of responsibility for the children.

In addition, life became more urban. Travel became quicker. Families were busier and had less time to communicate. Instead of traveling many hours by train, they ended up in separate cars, speeding down different highways.

"And when communication breaks down, society breaks down," Holmes insisted.

Education changed. There were no more one-room schools in which the older helped the younger. Classrooms were divided and grew larger and more impersonal in many cases.

Families began to move. They lost those networks of support from earlier days.

And they found television.

"It's the greatest teacher the world has ever known," Holmes said, but what it teaches is not at all great. Television has taught modern society that a situation is not normal without a drink, that there are drugs to change whatever mood one is in, that casual sex is okay, that violence is expedient and that hard work and delayed gratification are unacceptable, he said.

Basically, society began to change because children did not get what they needed, Holmes maintained. "And that's where the church comes in. Churches can head off some of these things if they do their jobs right. If they do not do their jobs, I'm going to get these young people later (in a treatment center)."

So what can the church do as far as young people are concerned? The answer, Holmes said, lies in a study done of 5,000 addicted people. The study identified seven significant characteristics. The addicted individuals:

- Had a weak perception of their personal significance. As a result they sought relief from those feelings of low esteem through unhealthy behaviors and substances.

- Had a weak perception of their personal capabilities.

- Had a weak perception of their personal power over their lives and their environment.

- Had weak interpersonal skills.

- Had weak intrapersonal skills.

- Had weak judgmental skills.

- Had weak systemic skills -- could not work together with others to achieve a goal.

A companion study found 5,000 persons without serious addictions stronger in each of those seven areas, Holmes said. Individuals in the second study had had someone who affirmed them encouraged them and saw them as valuable, he said. As a result, they believed they could make a difference in their own lives and the world. They liked themselves, They had good life skills.

The non-addicted group of persons had parents who loved one another and were best friends and who were open to talking with the child on any subject without putting him or her down.

In addition, the study found that the members of the second group attended church with their families on a regular basis. Holmes suggested that is a highly significant finding coming from a government-funded study.

And it is highly challenging to the church -- because it indicates the faith community can play a definite role in preparing persons for life. It shows the need for the church to invest in the lives of young people, to teach them necessary life skills and to do all it can to keep their families together.

"The faith factor is key," Holmes said. "But often it is the forgotten factor."

It is forgotten by the church sometimes as well, he added, admitting he has a "lover's quarrel" with the church.

For instance, the rise of self-help groups stand as indictment against the church because they have proven willing to do what the church too often has declined to do -- to "take that which is unlovely and ugly and work with it," he said.

Holmes is quick to follow up his indictments with an affirmation, however. "The church has so many things to offer," he said. "When we get an addiction out of a life, we leave a hole that must be filled. The church has a unique opportunity to fill that hole. But we fail too many times."

"So am I critical of some things going on in churches?" Holmes continued. "Yes. Am I unhappy with the way some churches deal with people? Yes. But do I think there's another organization out there that can do more to help people? No."

The key lies in people willing to invest their lives in others, to get angry about the way things are being done and do something to change them, he said. It lies in people who make a commitment to be honest with themselves, open to whatever is needed in their own lives and willing to allow God to work within those lives.

It is these people -- who acknowledge their own weaknesses and addictions, who demonstrate their own need for God's grace, who are honest about their spiritual pilgrimages and willing to use their experiences to help others -- who can reach out to others and make a difference, Holmes said.

And while the effect of one's efforts may seem small, Holmes urged persons to be undaunted. "We won't see much results in our lifetimes, but we have to start somewhere. If we don't start somewhere, it's not going to get done.

"So what are you doing where you are?"

-30-

Addiction a problem for all people, author says

By Lacy Thompson

NEW ORLEANS (ABP) -- All people are addicted -- to something, maintains author Gerald May.

"All of us suffer from addiction," May writes in his book "Addiction and Grace."

"The psychological, neurological and spiritual dynamics of full-fledged addiction are actively at work within every human being," he continues. "We are all addicts in every sense of the word. Moreover, our addictions are our own worst enemies. They enslave us with chains of our own making."

While many people do not have a problem with alcohol, drugs, tobacco or gambling, they may have problems with anger, coffee, computers or golf -- and the list goes on, May insists.

And while some addictions are more physically and emotionally destructive than others, all addictions are spiritually destructive, he says.

That is because all addictions are spiritual in nature, May notes. "I am convinced that all human beings have an inborn desire for God," writes May, director for Research and Program Development at the Shalem Institute in Washington. "Whether we are consciously religious or not, this desire is our deepest longing and our most precious treasure. It gives us meaning. ... The yearning is the essence of the human spirit; it is the origin of our highest hopes and most noble dreams."

Unfortunately, that inborn desire can never be filled in this life, and that places humans at dis-ease.

Many people respond by repressing or misidentifying the longing, May says, but the greatest danger is addiction -- when something other than God becomes the focus of attention, energy and desire. "(Addictions) become preoccupations and obsessions; they come to rule our lives ...," May says. "(That is) why addiction is the most powerful psychic enemy of humanity's desire for God."

The Bible calls it idolatry, May says. "Addiction makes idolaters of us all, because it forces us to worship these objects of attachment, thereby preventing us from truly, freely loving God and one another."

"Addiction is when you have no choice," May said in an interview. "You feel compelled. It doesn't matter what we're talking about when it's a matter of compulsion rather than freedom.

"And the spiritual importance of that is that we're meant to be free. ... So anything that hinders that freedom is a problem."

It is spirituality gone awry.

"Saint Augustine once said that God is always trying to give good things to us, but our hands are too full to receive them," May writes. "If our hands are full, they are full of things to which we are addicted. And not only our hands, but also our hearts, minds and attention are clogged with addiction.

"Our addictions fill up spaces within us, spaces where grace might flow."

May acknowledges that most people would rather see addiction as a disease or affliction that other people have. But he is adamant in his view that addiction is something no one escapes. Indeed, humans are faced with the prospect of struggling with addictions throughout their lives, May says.

There is only one answer -- the grace of God, May says.

"Grace is the most powerful force in the universe," May writes. "It can transcend ... addiction and every other internal or external power that seeks to oppress the freedom of the human heart. Grace is where our hope lies."

Some people see dealing with addictions simply as a matter of willpower, May says. Unfortunately, many of these simply fall into the trap of trading a more destructive addiction for a less destructive one.

They are reforming behavior, rather than transforming their desires, May says. May calls such transformation "deliverance," which, he says, does not remove one's addiction but enables a person to make a change in behavior.

May does not deny deliverance has a miraculous quality. "(But) the real miracle was that avoidance became possible; the person could actually do it. Deliverance does not remove a person's responsibility; it does empower the person to exercise responsibility simply, gently and effectively."

How deliverance comes is a matter of mystery, May says. People cannot create such a moment of grace and enabling -- but they can pray and be open and ready to respond to God.

They can choose to live openly before God, to admit weaknesses and present themselves to God just as they are, May says. They can choose to live responsibly and to seek and follow God's guidance.

Enabled by God, they can choose to stop their addictive behavior, he says -- to say "no" and keep saying "no" to temptation. One joins his or her will with divine will and allows God's grace to enable a change. "Here, finally, is the proper place of willpower in the spiritual life," May notes. "We bring our intention, our effort, our strength and all else that we can muster to the cause of love."

People can expect to fail and give in to temptation from time to time, but grace is always present, May says.

Some people shy away from that idea, May notes. They look for a God who will come in and deliver them once and for all from addictions and the hardships of life.

It does not work that way, May insists. Instead, the call of God is to focus on God as the source of true security and to risk that God is trustworthy.

Answering that call takes honesty, May points out. "We have unconsciously been saying no to God in countless areas of our lives all along. Honesty simply asks if we are willing to acknowledge some of this. Can we stop hiding our secret desires and start claiming them openly before God, who already knows about them anyway?"

"Honesty before God requires the most fundamental risk of faith we can take: the risk that God is good, that God does love us unconditionally. It is in taking this risk that we rediscover our dignity. To bring the truth of ourselves, just as we are, to God, just as God is, is the most dignified thing we can do in this life."