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Monthly commentary from the President of the Assemblies of God Theological Seminary

Juventud-Divino Tesoro!
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In Latin America there is a saying, "Juventud-Divino Tesoro! Youth—A Divine Treasure! America cheered recently as 15-year-old Elizabeth Smart was found. Abducted from her home in Salt Lake City nine months ago, she was discovered wandering the nearby streets with her two abductors, Brian David Mitchell and his wife, Wanda Barzee. It now seems increasingly clear Elizabeth was abducted to create a polygamous family. While lawyers banter on Fox News Network about the kinds of charges that should be brought against Mitchell and Barzee and the depth of trauma Elizabeth experienced, parents around the country hug their children a wee bit tighter and try to avoid thinking about what Elizabeth and her parents have walked through and the dark valleys yet to be crossed.

Every time a tragedy like this comes to a conclusion filled with hope, several conflicting realities emerge. For every Elizabeth Smart episode, there are countless unsolved cases with families that live on the edge of despair 24/7. Despite the vicarious experience of sheer joy we experience with Elizabeth's return, children are increasingly a disposable item. I'm not speaking about the decaying slums of Sao Paulo, Manila or Nairobi, but urban and even rural America where children are social footballs and, all too often, punching bags for their frustrated and spaced out parents.

As complex as these social realities are, the op-ed columns of papers across the nation will inevitably comment on the bizarre religious practices of Brian Mitchell and Wanda Barzee. With the web of control that was woven around Elizabeth, some editorials will predictably conclude that all religion is inevitably abusive and simply another form of power for the purpose of victimization.

The Mitchell and Barzee plot is nothing new. People have been trying to get God to agree with them on their personal versions of "King/Queen of the Mountain" since the Creation! But let's not simply respond to this story as if it ends happily ever after. Mitchell and Barzee cannot be dismissed as weird religious zealots who lived simply and were delusional. They were predators who kidnapped at least one teenage girl at knifepoint. Elizabeth Smart's life has had irreparable damage; fortunately she has a strong family and hopefully time and God's grace will heal her brokenness.

However, James 1:27 makes it quite clear that true religion (that God accepts as pure and faultless) is graphically displayed in caring for widows and orphans. In other words, James clearly indicates that the most pure and understandable religious expression for Christians is when they care for the most vulnerable-defenseless people. Our world will understand the character of God when they see Christian communities standing in an obvious gap created by an increasingly dysfunctional society. When people who claim to be followers of Jesus increasingly act in accordance with the injunction of James' epistle, even the op-ed pundits will have to acknowledge the difference between false and pure religion.

Getting upset about "religion" being lumped into a generic file to be summarily "deleted" is not enough. We have to be pro-active in taking the words of St. James seriously. True religion is in short supply these days-we can do something about that!

Byron D. Klaus, President Assemblies of God Theological Seminary

Did you miss our latest Leadership Roundtable in Carlinville, Illinois? You have another chance to hear Leonard Sweet at General Council 2003. Make plans to attend the "Ministry on the Edge: The Mission to Post-Christian America" on July 28 (6-9 p.m.) and July 29 (9 a.m. - 3 p.m.). Dr. Sweet, author of *Soul Tsunami* and *Carpe Manana*, will focus on developing and sustaining ministry for the changing culture for the new century. Graduate credit available. For further information or to register, call Randy Walls at 800-467-2487, ext 1044 or visit www.agseminary.edu