August 19, 2026

MESSENGER

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Sundays at 1 PM

942 Altadena Dr.

Altadena, CA 91001

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Contact Information:

Due to the fires, our mail has been forwarded. Please send mail to PO Box 91055, Pasadena, CA 91109. You may still call the church phone at 626-797-8970;

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GOD IN A BOX

As long as humans have been on this earth, they have had a sense that there is a Greater Force beyond them, and they've tried to capture this idea in cave paintings, ceremonies, pagan myths, temples, monuments, religions and denominations. All these have been sincere attempts to put God in a finite box.

When God revealed himself to his Chosen People, the Israelites, he built on this idea by directing them to construct a holy box, which became known as the "Ark of the Covenant." In it they were to place the stone tablets inscribed with the Ten Commandments, a sample of the miraculous *manna* food by which he sustained them during their wilderness years and the priestly rod which reminded them of his presence. But he demonstrated that even a box that held such powerful relics could not **contain** God himself; it is described as the "mercy seat" on which he sits, or the "footstool" before his infinite throne.[1]

Ever since those primal experiences, humans have tried to **box God in** to a manageable size and shape. In the Modern Church we see this in a number of popular trends:

The BELIEF BOX
Right belief has been a primary litmus test ever since Jesus' disciples started spreading the Gospel in the world of their day. Creeds were established, listing essential beliefs about who he was and what he came to do. People who didn't fit these creedal Belief Boxes were labeled heretics and excluded from the Church. Throughout 2,000 years since, different groups have emerged --- Catholics, Orthodox, Episcopalians, Lutherans, Methodists, Baptists Pentecostals --- each one convinced that they have the correct Belief Box. It reportedly was a Quaker leader who expressed it this way: "The whole world's mad except thee and me, and I have my doubts about thee."

Today, anyone with a computer can go on YouTube and watch endless videos by one group of "insiders" drawing clear lines to show who the "outsiders" are and why they need to be avoided. Rather than encouraging viewers to explore the library of God's love and grace, they're teaching them to lock the bookcases of all but the safest of ideas.

The BEHAVIOR BOX
Behavior issues may be even more prominent in online interfaith discussions than belief issues. I guess it all began around the year 2002, with the revelations about the cover-up of sexual abuse in the Roman Catholic Church. Protestant bloggers were delighted to magnify those wounds. Then they realized that when they pointed at Catholic scandals, three fingers were pointing back at themselves. Since then, new revelations of scandals involving popular Evangelical leaders--- ranging from sexual immorality, to financial fraud, to toxic authoritarianism --- have appeared online just about every week. Accusations go in all directions. It's a gotcha world out there!

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I don't see any online consensus about how we can bring this under control. The people making accusations have to admit that they themselves are not perfect. Two key criteria seem to be emerging as critical: (1) Church leadership must be accountable in a way that makes sense to the public, and (2) Hypocrisy and cover-up magnify the offense.

The BIBLE BOX

This may not seem as obvious, but I believe the Evangelical community of faith has to face up to it. The Bible itself is a box that can't contain or control God. Luther famously used the phrase that was key to the Protestant Reformation: *Sole Scriptura, "Scripture Alone!" The way Fundamentalists have applied this, it seems to mean "Scripture contains **all** truth,"* and therefore, the Bible is all you need to understand yourself and the world you live in. Evangelicals should distance themselves from that idea and affirm the many truths that come from science, nature, and accumulated human knowledge.

The Bible is not a single voice; it contains 66 books, written by as many as 40 authors over more than 1000 years. Like the Ark of the Covenant, it contains important insights and memorabilia from individual faith journeys over many generations. Gathered together, they express a unique Word of God, by which we can find a relationship with him. But the Bible, like all the other boxes, cannot **contain** God.

Pastor George Van Alstine

[1] God's instructions for building the Ark of the Covenant are recorded in Genesis 25. Its contents are described in Numbers 17:10, Deuteronomy 10:4-5 and 1 Kings 8:9. Its dimensions were 4 ft. long, 2 ft. wide and 2 ft. high. Most historians believe it was destroyed along with the entire Jerusalem Temple in 586 BC, but the Ethiopian Orthodox Church claims that the Ark is still securely hidden in their Aksum Church.