

ARIZONA CHRISTIAN UNIVERSITY MAGAZINE // SPRING 2023

ABLAZE



**JIM & NAOMI
RHODE**

BE THE CHURCH

**DR. BRIE
TURNS**

FROM HEALING TO HELPING

**UNDERSTANDING
WORLDVIEW**

WHAT'S YOUR FILTER?

the PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

SPRING 2023



For those of us who have grown up in or been in the United States for most of our lives, it is becoming increasingly clear that we are headed into uncharted waters.

During the lifetime of anyone now alive, being a Christian with mainstream, orthodox biblical beliefs put you well within the center of a culture that not only respected and appreciated the contributions and influence of Christians and the church, but often celebrated and affirmed those same principles.

The notion that we should treat others as we would want to be treated, that we would deal honestly with each other and not steal, that we would help and protect the most vulnerable and the poor, that we would celebrate and affirm traditional marriage and welcome children into the world—these ideas rooted in Scripture were taught in our schools, churches, and homes, and reflected in the community and cultural life of our nation, in the media, in song, and in government policy.

In just a few short generations, all of that has changed.

ACU's George Barna, of our Cultural Research Center, has chronicled the decline not only of those who identify as Christians, but even more significantly, of those even among self-identified Christians who actually believe and attempt to live their lives through the guidance of Scripture—those who have a biblical worldview. In the most recent data, just one in 25 Americans today views the world through the lens of historic, biblical Christianity.

Because Christian beliefs are rooted in truth—and therefore align with what is revealed in nature, science and human experience—all sorts of mayhem and dysfunction is now at loose in our world. Without the cultural cohesion brought about by shared faith in God and basic agreement about His principles as to how we should live, our culture and nation are beginning to unravel.

More and more, for those of us raised in this country, it feels like Christians are being targeted for persecution. In reality—historically and even today when you consider what is happening in the rest of the world—Christians in America still have more peace, influence, prosperity and freedom than at virtually any point in history.

But that is changing fast. Quickly in our nation, orthodox Christian beliefs and ideas that gave birth to an exceptional nation are considered “dangerous” and even

“unsafe.” When you lose the foundation in truth underpinning a culture, it doesn't take long before good becomes evil and evil becomes good, light is replaced by darkness and what was sweet becomes bitter. (Isaiah 5:20)

As Christians, there are two ways we can react.

We can bemoan our fate, complain about the state of things, get mad at those who are lost in darkness while we remember the good old days and beg Jesus to hurry up and return to rescue us from this ship that is most certainly going down.

Or, in humility, we can recognize that every generation of Christians since the time of Christ—the majority of whom faced much more cultural hostility than we do today—thought Jesus was coming back in their lifetime. So far, they were all wrong.

We can note that Scripture and history teach us that nations ebb and flow in their allegiance to God, as Israel showed us repeatedly in the Old Testament, and various revivals and awakenings in Europe, Africa and America have demonstrated in more recent times.

We can recommit ourselves to being “salt and light,” to seeking “the welfare of the city,” and redouble our efforts to bring good, light and sweetness into an increasingly polarized and violent culture.

We can seek to build institutions that train and prepare spiritual warriors to bring hope, peace and truth to a lost world, because we know God's design for humanity—to think and live according to the truths of Scripture—will lead to human flourishing and can heal any nation.

That's what we are doing at Arizona Christian University. It's why we are one of the fastest-growing universities in our nation, and why we have hope for the future in the midst of these challenging days. And we hope you will join us.

Yours for equipping Christian Leaders,

A handwritten signature in dark ink that reads "Len Munsil". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Len" being more prominent.

Len Munsil, B.S., J.D.

*President
Arizona Christian University*

inside

VOLUME II NO. III

01

From the
President

03

Paul
Hayden

Nothing to everything.

06

Understanding
Worldview

What's your filter?

09

Jim & Naomi
Rhode

Be the church.

11

The Firestorm
Arrives

Religious freedom
on trial.

13

Dr. Brie
Turns

Faculty spotlight.

15

Braxton
Johnson

Alumni spotlight.

17

Firestorm
Family

Celebrating milestones.

19

Class
Notes

Updates from Alumni.

ABLAZE

An Arizona Christian University publication

OUR MAGAZINE

The ABLAZE magazine is published by the Department of University Engagement. This publication is released bi-annually and distributed in autumn and spring. If this publication was shared with you and you would like to receive your own copy, go to <https://www.arizonachristian.edu/ablaze> to join our mailing list.

MISSION

Arizona Christian University provides a biblically integrated, liberal arts education equipping graduates to serve the Lord Jesus Christ in all aspects of life, as leaders of influence and excellence.

ON THE COVER

Dr. George Barna teaching students in ACU's Jim & Naomi Rhode Auditorium.

Send address changes to:
Office of University Engagement
1 W. Firestorm Way
Glendale, AZ 85306
advancement@arizonachristian.edu
<https://www.arizonachristian.edu>





PAUL HAYDEN

How one night changed everything

From NOTHING TO EVERYTHING



High school sophomore Paul Hayden was steaming after a contentious argument with his mom. At that moment, he wanted nothing to do with God.

That's when he heard a knock at the door. He opened it to find his basketball coach and mentor, who told him, "Grab your basketball shoes and get in the car."

Paul had no idea where they were going—or that his entire life was about to change.

He was surprised to arrive a few minutes late at "Make a Difference" (M.A.D.) House, an inner-city youth basketball ministry. That night he heard a gospel presentation, and it resonated with him in a powerful way for the first time. He continued to

attend M.A.D. House meetings, and a few months later, made a commitment to follow Jesus.

"Everything changed," Paul said. And he never looked back.

When Paul graduated high school, he was a highly sought-after recruit, and had several college options available to him. He selected Arizona Christian University because of its biblical values, its proximity to home, and its competitive basketball program. "I was at peace that ACU was where I was supposed to be," he recalls.

The ACU basketball team was a great fit for Paul. His skill, dedication, and leadership have helped advance the team to a top five national ranking throughout the most recent season

and a trip to the Elite 8 at the NAIA national tournament in Kansas City.

"On and off the court, the coaches here have helped me to grow in my basketball abilities, personal goals, and spiritual life," Paul stated.

When he started his freshman year, he thought he wanted a career in business. But by the end of his first year on campus, Paul found that his business classes didn't actually interest or inspire him. He was, however, highly engaged by what he was learning in his biblical studies courses. "I developed a deep love for the word of God," Paul shared. His newfound passion for the Bible led him to switch his major to biblical and theological studies, where he has thrived under the instruction and mentorship of his professors.

"ACU does a really good job teaching us how to think," Paul said. His classes have helped him to understand current events in light of what the Bible says, contrasting our ever-changing culture with God's unchanging truth.

Paul is on track to graduate in May 2024, and plans to pursue a master's degree at Dallas Theological Seminary or Phoenix Seminary. His long-term goal is to work in full-time Christian ministry, either at a church or through sports ministry. He is excited by the idea of using basketball to connect young men to Christ by discipling them in the same way his coaches have poured into him.

Last summer, Paul had the opportunity to volunteer overseas at a Christian basketball camp for two and a half weeks. He and another ACU student traveled to a volatile part of the Middle East to work with youth through a ministry similar to M.A.D. House. While there, Paul had

a chance to use his basketball skills and theological training to introduce a new generation of student-athletes to Jesus. Because of that experience, he is also considering cross-cultural ministry work.

Whatever path Paul takes in the future, he is committed to fulfilling ACU's mission to "transform culture with truth" by leading people to understand and stand for what is true. "That's how you transform culture with truth," Paul reflected. "One soul at a time. And then the Holy Spirit does the rest."

Although Paul is preparing for a career in Christian ministry, he's not waiting until graduation to get started. He currently leads a Bible study for young adults and directs the middle school program at North Phoenix Baptist Church. He has also experienced the joy of knowing that his transformed life has drawn members of his family to Jesus. After he decided to follow Christ, his

mother did likewise, and his grandmother is reading the Bible for the first time.

Paul encourages his peers to consider how they might impact those around them even while they're still in school: "It's not about having a degree or a certain amount of confidence. God just wants you to be obedient wherever He has you. Follow Him and get to know Him more. He'll move you to a place where your light can shine."

As he reflects on his own spiritual journey, Paul quotes Genesis 50:20: "You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good." He remembers that night during his sophomore year of high school when he had that terrible argument with his mom. "The devil meant that for evil, but God used it to change my whole life. He took me from a place of wanting nothing to do with Him to wanting everything to do with Him."



UNDERSTANDING **WORLDVIEW**



Dr. Barna meets with ACU faculty and staff

Three very different movies topped the box office earlier this spring—*Avatar: The Way of Water*, *Cocaine Bear*, and *Jesus Revolution*.

What do these movies—one featuring computer-generated Pandora forest-dwellers, another following the wild, gruesome romp of a bear high on cocaine, and the last, a retelling of the hippie revival (or “Jesus Movement”) in 1970s California—have in common?

On the surface very little. Yet whether we realize it or not, each movie presents a set of ideas that—taken as a whole—reflect a worldview. Creatively and powerfully presented, these worldviews compete for our attention and have the potential to shape and deeply influence our understanding of the world.

We live in a culture filled with an incredibly wide assortment of worldviews. In the first two movies, we see the worldviews of Pantheism and Naturalism. As believers we resonate most strongly with what we see in *Jesus Revolution*—because its worldview is familiar and

fairly easy for us to recognize. But that’s not the case with most cultural messages we experience. Instead, we’re regularly bombarded with “competing worldviews,” views of the world that are inconsistent with and often oppose biblical ideas.

Although worldview is all around us—in entertainment, social media, news, politics, even in science—most of us spend little time thinking about worldview in general, or about our own worldview. In fact, new research from the Cultural Research Center at Arizona Christian University shows our nation is experiencing a crisis, with biblical worldview levels at a historic low of 4% among American adults.

When it comes to worldview, Americans are taking bits and pieces of the many available worldviews and cobbling them together into a highly individualized life philosophy known as Syncretism. A whopping 94% of American adults hold this worldview. With so many powerful cultural messages to choose from, the popularity of Syncretism makes sense. It helps us understand how

in a single weekend, other-worldly avatars, a buzzed bear, and Jesus can all share the marquee.

Arizona Christian University is all about worldview.

As freshmen, our students complete a worldview class and biblical worldview development is woven throughout their studies. We’re the only university in the nation measuring our students’ worldview. And one of our institutional strategic goals is to be America’s Premier Biblical Worldview University.

It’s clear that we’re all about worldview—but what is worldview all about?

There’s no one better to answer that question than veteran worldview researcher Dr. George Barna, the co-founder and director of research for the Cultural Research Center. With more than 30 years’ experience measuring the worldview of Americans and 50-plus books on faith and culture—many of them *New York Times* bestsellers—he’s the expert when it comes to all things worldview.



Dr. Barna educating students
in the Jim & Naomi Rhode Auditorium

What is a worldview?

A good starting point is with what Dr. Barna calls *worldview realities*.

First, everyone has a worldview—whether they know it or not. Part of being human is the need to understand the world around us. Worldview is the filter through which we experience, interpret, and respond to the world.

Every decision you make is based on your worldview. It affects every aspect of your life—relationships, lifestyle, finances, identity, faith, morals, values, and goals.

Your worldview is the accumulation of your most important beliefs, which in turn guide how you act. Often, we think of worldview as what we know, just head knowledge. But in reality, our worldview is far more deeply rooted within us, affecting both our beliefs and our behavior. As Dr. Barna often points out, you *do* what you *believe*.

Not only does worldview direct our individual lives, it also influences, shapes, and ultimately defines who we are as a society.

Worldview really does matter—enabling us individually to flourish according to God's plan, or not; and as a nation, providing the framework to experience God's favor and blessing, or not.

What's the biblical worldview?

We encounter many worldviews around us. One of those is Biblical Theism (also known as the biblical worldview), a way of experiencing, interpreting, and responding to reality that is consistent with biblical principles. God created the world and everything in it, and with the biblical worldview, we have clear guidance to understand and live well within His created order.

A shorthand definition for biblical worldview is—"to think and act like Jesus." As Dr. Barna reminds us, a

biblical worldview enables us to become disciples of Jesus Christ, to have His mind, His heart, and to do what He would do.

Dr. Barna's research measures worldview beliefs and behaviors across eight categories (God, Creation, History; Bible, Truth, Morals; Sin, Salvation, God Relationship; Human Character and Nature; Faith Practices; Family and Value of Life; Purpose and Calling; and Lifestyle, Behavior, Relationships). Thinking and living biblically in these areas are the essence of having a biblical worldview.

Where does our worldview come from?

Amazingly, decades of research show that our worldview begins to develop at a very young age (15 to 18 months) and is almost fully formed by age 13. During our lifetime it's expanded, refined, and better articulated, but according to the

research, most Americans die with the same basic worldview they had as a teenager. Sometimes major life events interrupt this pattern. For example, many Christians can pinpoint their personal salvation experience as the start of a radical transformation of their worldview. And in ACU's immersive worldview experience, we see worldview change among our students.

A number of forces influence worldview—family, friends and peers, school, news and media, laws, and public policy. Surprisingly, churches have little influence on worldview compared to cultural forces. And the most powerful influence at any age is “arts and entertainment”—or in other words—the culture.

Our worldview develops as we choose ideas to internalize as our own. A number of factors figure into this—what best fits our self-image, what's most popular or common, our feelings and emotions, pragmatism (what seems to solve our immediate problem), the path of least resistance, a childhood lesson or personal experience, even imitation of heroes or role models. This list helps us understand the prevalence of Syncretism. Syncretists are literally picking and choosing a random mix of ideas and synthesizing them into their personal view of life.

Developing a biblical worldview

But there is a better way—strategic biblical worldview development.

We're told (repeatedly) in Scripture to seek God's truth and wisdom. We're reminded to deny the primacy of human reason and emotion, and instead look to God for truth, for answers, for an anchoring in a world filled with differing worldviews. We're encouraged to be obedient and faithful to God. And Scripture commands us to discern false worldviews from the biblical worldview (Col. 2:8):

See to it that there is no one who takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception in accordance with human tradition, in accordance with the elementary principles of the world [false worldviews], rather than in accordance with Christ [biblical worldview].

In his bestselling book, *Think Like Jesus*, Dr. Barna reminds us that instead of seeing and interpreting reality through the eyes of the world, our job is to exchange the world's lenses for the Lord's lenses, the spectacles of life. God can help you choose the Word over the world.

SEVEN CORNERSTONES OF A BIBLICAL WORLDVIEW

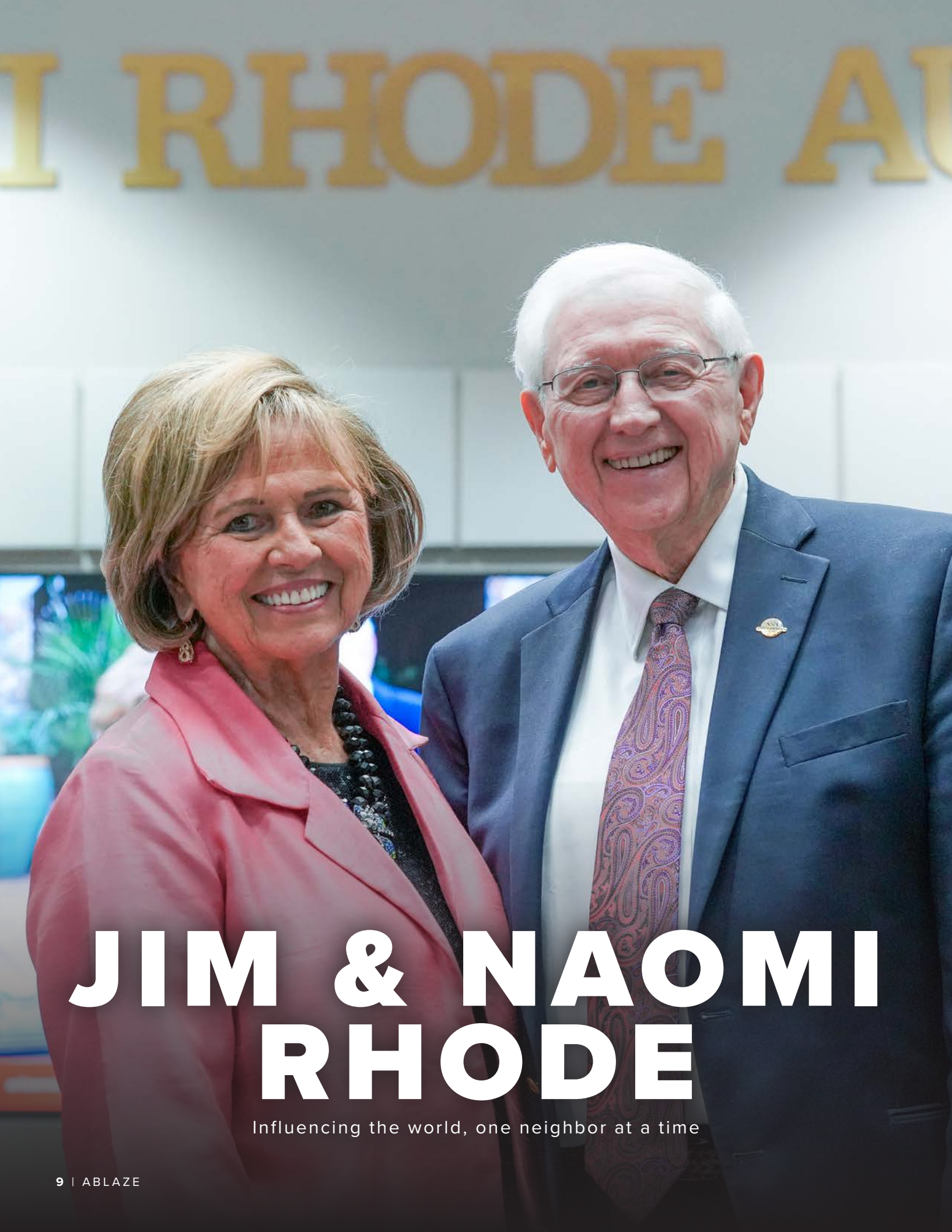
Research shows that the best way to strengthen your worldview is by digging into Scripture, the source of biblical worldview. And biblical basics are the best place to start. After decades of research, Dr. Barna encourages starting with the “Seven Cornerstones of a Biblical Worldview”:

1. Biblically orthodox understanding of God's existence and nature
2. Acknowledgement of being a sinner, in need of a savior.
3. Jesus is the only way to salvation.
4. Absolute moral truth exists; God is the basis of all truth.
5. The Bible is the true and reliable word of God.
6. Success is consistent obedience to God.
7. Life's purpose is to know, love, serve God with all your heart, mind, strength, and soul.

If you don't understand, embrace, and live according to all seven, there's only a tiny chance of having a biblical worldview.

Those cornerstones give us a place to start, no matter your age. Developing strong mentoring and accountability also helps. Many worldview resources are available on our website, www.culturalresearchcenter.com.





JIM & NAOMI RHODE

Influencing the world, one neighbor at a time

Be THE CHURCH

Some people that you meet in life just have “it.” That indefinable quality that makes you want to be around them, to hear their story, that makes you feel inspired and encouraged by their mere presence. Jim and Naomi Rhode—they both have “it.”

Anyone fortunate enough to spend an afternoon with the Rhodes is guaranteed a memorable experience. Entrepreneurs, authors, evangelists, hall of fame public speakers—the Rhodes have influenced countless others over the course of their lives. And their love for Jesus and their lifelong commitment to using the platform that the Lord has given them to share the gospel has established a legacy that will long be remembered.

“Early in my marriage I realized I had the gift of evangelism,” stated Naomi. “It was the Holy Spirit that prompted me to ask . . . do my neighbors, my new friends know about Jesus?”

A true Renaissance woman, Naomi Rhode is qualified to speak on a myriad of subjects. But one topic rises above the rest.

“As a young couple, Jim and I joined a wonderful local church,” Naomi recalled. “After the church service one Sunday evening, I cornered the Pastor on the sidewalk and blurted out, ‘Grant, I need to talk with you . . . I am so passionate about my neighbors knowing Jesus—how do I get them to come to church?’”

As she retold the story, Naomi paused, and then continued with a small smile. “He looked at me with a very kind face and said, ‘Naomi, don’t bring them to church.’”

That certainly wasn’t the response Naomi had anticipated. She felt led by the Lord to evangelize, to invite others to hear the truth of Scripture that she and Jim were learning about each week at their church. And her pastor was telling her not to invite people to join them on Sunday mornings?

It all became clear to her as Pastor Grant Howard continued. “To your neighbors, you and Jim are the Church. Lead them to a relationship with Christ by your life example, your faith, and your words. And when they become believers, then bring them to Church. We will help you disciple them. The church inside these walls can help strengthen their new faith.”

Their pastor’s challenge more than 60 years ago completely shaped Jim and Naomi’s life and professional career from that day forward. “When Jim and I started speaking at conferences, some people encouraged us to focus on the church audience and Christian conferences. That didn’t fit our vision . . . our calling was to impact the (secular) marketplace . . . to be ‘church’ for those who didn’t have church . . . to share the good news of the gospel,” Naomi explained.

And so, for the last 40 years, Jim and Naomi have been speaking at conferences and leading seminars for dentists, physicians, and the general public in almost every state of the union and in 16 countries around the world.

For Jim and Naomi, “being the church” in the marketplace meant building relationships with couples attending their seminars—couples who were seeking truth, professional guidance, or even help in their marriages. Sometimes it meant hosting Sunday worship services at national conferences at which they spoke. In countless situations, often over a meal or during conversations in a hotel lobby, the Rhodes have played an instrumental role in leading those in their sphere of influence to Christ.

Then in 2011, Jim and Naomi were introduced to Arizona Christian University when they attended the university’s first Daniel Award Gala, honoring President George W. Bush for his courageous public faith.

“When we learned about ACU’s mission to transform culture with truth—to equip students for ministry

in the marketplace, we realized their mission was 100% aligned with our life work,” stated Jim and Naomi.

That missional alignment led the Rhodes to make a significant, seven-figure financial investment in Arizona Christian University in 2022—to help equip future Christian leaders to make an impact for Christ in the marketplace.

In honor of that investment, ACU renamed (what was formerly known as) the AT&T Auditorium to The Jim and Naomi Rhode Auditorium. The 240-seat Rhode Auditorium is located in the Administration Building, and over the years has hosted U.S. Presidents and other global leaders. It also serves as the primary gathering place for internal and external conferences at the university.

It’s a fitting location to honor the Rhodes and their background as nationally recognized public speakers. During their professional speaking careers, both Jim and Naomi served as President of the National Speakers Association (NSA). During Jim’s year of service, his theme was “Voicing Vision and Values,” a call to those who address large groups to remember their obligation to convey a vision that honors the Lord. And during Naomi’s year of service, her theme was “Privilege of the Platform,” reminding speakers to recognize and carefully steward the opportunities they have to speak publicly and inspire others.

It is no coincidence that the auditorium now known by the Rhode name surrounds a platform. It’s from this very platform that ACU professors equip students for leadership, and visiting theologians, authors, and speakers deliver messages that advance the biblical worldview to students, staff, faculty—and the local community. The guiding principles of Jim and Naomi’s career will endure and live on through the work of ACU and the Firestorm family.



The FIRESTORM ARRIVES

For the first 50 years of ACU's history the university was known as Southwestern Conservative Baptist Bible College, and like many other Christian institutions across the country, Southwestern's athletic teams were known as the Eagles. Now there's certainly nothing wrong with the Eagle as a mascot. The majestic animal has been the national bird of the United States since 1782, and also invokes Isaiah 40:31, "But those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint."

As the University entered its sixth decade, several changes were undertaken. The school changed its name to Arizona Christian University. It added several new programs of study, broadening its academic offerings to equip students to enter all seven spheres of cultural

influence and advance ACU's new mission to Transform Culture with Truth.

And at the same time, Arizona Christian University adopted a new athletic team name and logo: the Firestorm. The name was selected by a vote of the students, and ACU is the only school in the country to be known by that name. There were a number of inspirations behind the name, but the most poignant (and prescient) had to do with an acknowledgement that ACU's steadfast commitment to the truth of Scripture and the biblical worldview made it highly likely that the university would face a "firestorm" of controversy in an increasingly hostile culture at some point in the future.

They were right.

On Thursday, March 9, 2023, ACU was compelled to file a lawsuit against Washington Elementary School

District for permanently cutting ties with the university simply because of its religious beliefs. For the past 11 years, Arizona Christian University and WESD, the largest elementary school district in Arizona, had a mutually beneficial partnership where students in ACU's elementary education program would student-teach and shadow teachers in the school district.

That partnership, however, ended abruptly two weeks earlier when all five WESD board members voted unanimously to not renew its relationship with ACU because of the University's religious beliefs on biblical marriage and sexuality, even though no complaints had been made about an ACU student or alumnus.

At the Feb. 23 board meeting, board members publicly and specifically cited the university's biblically based positions on several important cultural issues as the reason for their



decision. The board members showed blatant hostility to ACU's sincerely held religious beliefs, questioning how one could "be committed to Jesus Christ " and at the same time respect LGBTQ students and board members. One board member even stated that the mere presence of ACU student teachers would make some students—and herself—feel "unsafe." Another stated she was "embarrassed" that she allowed the school district's partnership with ACU to continue for so long. All of this despite the fact that there was no evidence of any wrongdoing by any ACU student-teachers.

In fact, ACU students have received glowing reviews and nearly uniform support from the district's own teachers and administrators. "For over a decade, Arizona Christian University's Elementary Education programs have faithfully served children in the Phoenix and Glendale communities in partnership with Washington Elementary School District," noted Dr. Linnea Lyding, Dean of the Shelly Roden School of Education and the School of Arts, Science & Humanities at ACU. "Our university students pursuing teaching careers bring respect, kindness, and

excellence to the elementary classrooms," she continued.

This decision to file a lawsuit was made after prayerful consideration and consultation with legal experts, the ACU Board of Trustees, and others.

"The First Amendment to the Constitution of the United States gives us the freedom to create churches, schools, and universities based on values and principles aligned with our Christian faith and with biblical truth," stated ACU President Len Munsil. "It also protects us from being discriminated against by government entities because of those religious beliefs."

The WESD school board's recent decision to ban ACU students from serving as student teachers was wrong, unlawful, and will only hurt the district's students. Religious liberty and freedom of conscience are bedrock American principles, and we are committed to protecting the constitutional rights of our students and this institution."

Arizona Christian University is being represented in the lawsuit by

attorneys from Alliance Defending Freedom (ADF), the world's largest legal organization committed to protecting religious freedom, free speech, the sanctity of life, parental rights, and God's design for marriage and family.

At the time of this issue of *ABLAZE* going to print, the case is still ongoing. "We're asking all members and friends of the Firestorm family to pray for wisdom and direction for ACU leadership and our attorneys with ADF, as well as the Lord's protection and provision for the University," continued President Munsil. "We also ask that you join me in praying for blessings and protection for members of the Washington Elementary School Board, even though we strongly disagree with their decision and hope it will ultimately be reversed."

The firestorm has arrived. This is not a fight we chose. But it is a fight from which we cannot back down.

A portrait of Dr. Brie Turns, a woman with reddish-brown hair, smiling and wearing a black leather jacket over a grey top. She is standing outdoors with trees and a green lawn in the background.

DR. BRIE TURNS

From healing to helping

Through THICK & THIN

“Something really bad is going to happen to me and no one is going to notice or help.” This phrase replayed over and over in young Brie Turns’ mind every day during her seventh-grade year. At the time, she often missed school because of debilitating anxiety and panic attacks. Her parents were at a loss about what to do, so they sought out the school counselor, Mr. Beatty. Brie and Mr. Beatty became fast friends. He and his therapy dog, Sprocket, would pull Brie out of class to check on her and remind her that if she ever needed anything, he would be there. “I didn’t understand at the time why I was having panic attacks or how my friendship with Mr. Beatty was going to influence my life,” noted Brie. “But God did, and in hindsight I can see how He was working in my life through it all.”

Nine years later, Brie was on the verge of graduating from the University of Nevada Las Vegas, and felt led to continue her studies by pursuing a Masters Degree in Marriage and Family Therapy from Purdue University. She had not forgotten her middle school years when she had felt so alone and lost, and decided to keep the promise she had made to her 12-year-old self to serve families struggling with mental health. While at Purdue, Brie began attending a non-denominational Christian church and college group. As she continued to grow spiritually, it became clearer that the formal education she was receiving in her MFT program was decidedly not based on a biblical worldview. At the time, she wrestled with why the Lord had led her to continue her training for His calling at such a secular institution. But looking back, she can see His hand on her life once again.

Brie persevered, and after graduating from Purdue decided to attend Texas

Tech University to obtain a doctorate in Marriage and Family Therapy and Counseling. While there, she once again struggled with the overtly secular worldview advanced by her professors and mentors. At the same time, she remained steadfast in her walk with Jesus Christ and her commitment to follow God’s call to serve in the mental health field. In fact, her time at Texas Tech clarified her calling, and led her to further her research and clinical interest in ministering to families caring for a child with Autism.

After completing her education, Dr. Turns spent several years developing a private clinical practice and teaching at a well-known west coast graduate school. She also found time to write four books. Two of them, *I Will Always Love You* and *Whatever You Do, Don’t Look Under the Bed!* are for children, while the third, *Systemically Treating Autism* is one of the first texts to educate MFTs on the ethical and effective care for families raising a child with autism. Her fourth book, *Parent the Child You Have, Not the Child You Were* was written to help adults break generational patterns and raise thriving kids.

Then in the fall of 2021, Dr. Turns was approached by Dr. Carolyn Pela, an Associate Dean at Arizona Christian University. Dr. Pela and the leadership at ACU had decided to pursue accreditation to offer a graduate program in marriage and family therapy—one that (like all ACU courses) would be grounded in the biblical worldview and on the firm foundation of the authority of Scripture. After more than 60 years as a bachelor’s degree awarding institution, ACU was expanding its offerings into the graduate degree space.

“I made the decision to join ACU

because they are who they say they are,” said Dr. Turns. “They stand by their Mission Statement, Statement of Faith, and Core Commitments, and actually integrate the biblical worldview into their courses.”

“I also knew several ACU faculty members prior to joining the team,” continued Dr. Turns. “I knew their personal character, their principles, and their faith in Christ were aligned with mine, and that I wouldn’t have to worry about being around colleagues who would distort Scripture to fit a personal, anti-biblical ideology.”

ACU received formal accreditation from the Higher Learning Commission to offer a Master’s Degree in Marriage and Family Therapy (MFT) in January 2023, and classes will begin this fall. As part of the unique graduate program, students will learn about empirically based theories and models of serving families, entirely from a biblical worldview. In addition, under Dr. Turns’ leadership and direction, ACU will offer an optional concentration in “families with disabilities,” which will equip students to serve the world’s largest minority—individuals with disabilities.

Helping to launch the MFT program at ACU felt like a “full circle” moment for Dr. Turns. From her childhood mental health challenges to her personal experiences with the shortcomings of secular higher education, she knew God had been preparing her for such a time and opportunity as this.

“If you had told me in seventh grade how God was going to map out my life in order to serve others in His kingdom, I never would have believed you,” noted Dr. Turns. “But God had a plan better than anything I could have imagined.”



BRAXTON JOHNSON

Experiences that last a lifetime

First

BRAXTON JOHNSON | ALUMNI

THINGS FIRST

Braxton Johnson ('08) didn't follow a well-worn, traditional path to where he is today. But looking back, he can see the Lord's hand on him each step of the way.

"I didn't have a lot of biblical teaching as a young person, and I wanted to learn about the Bible," replied Braxton when asked why he chose to attend Southwestern/ACU for college.

He continued, "I was really into basketball, and several large universities were recruiting me to play for them, but I wanted to attend Southwestern."

Braxton did play basketball during his college years, but it was his spiritual growth and theological training that stood out to him as he reflected on his time on campus.

"I had a professor that was amazing," he remembered. "Dr. Schumacher taught the Bible from Genesis to Revelation . . . and taught us how to exegete scripture. That set me up for a lifetime of learning. I am still fascinated with theology . . . it helps us know what we believe and why we can believe it."

When asked how his studies impacted his future, Braxton stated without hesitation, "[They] established my biblical worldview . . . I was grounded there." As far as how his faith informs his decision making, he continued, "The Bible is my answer book. It isn't vague on all the important things."

Given his passion for theology and the biblical worldview, along with his Bible college education, one might think Braxton went on to become a pastor or professor. And he probably could have. Instead, the Lord led Braxton down a different path. He is now one of the youngest General Managers in the high-end retail automotive marketplace in the country.

Braxton didn't intend to pursue a career in the automotive industry. His journey started with a student internship at Sanderson Ford in Glendale, Arizona, a role that he pursued merely to fulfill an academic requirement to complete his degree. "I learned as much as I could [during my internship], and I worked hard for them. When the semester was over they offered me a position as a service advisor. It was 2008, a tough year for the economy, so I was just happy to get a job offer," he recalled.

After four years, Braxton transitioned to a different role with a new dealership, Bell Ford in Phoenix. While there, he was responsible for building a fleet services group from the ground up. Several years later, the owners asked him to move to their flagship Lexus dealership in Scottsdale, where he subsequently worked his way up to the position of General Manager of the entire dealership. Bell Lexus is Arizona's largest, oldest and #1 volume dealer. Braxton is responsible for managing more than 130 employees and a multifaceted business with a full service department, parts department, sales department, business office, and finance department.

When asked how his biblical worldview impacts his work, Braxton explained, "It's my responsibility to model integrity in all we do. I operate the business like I've been entrusted to run it."

When asked about his preternatural career advancement, he speaks about his mother. "She is a huge prayer warrior . . . she prays at least an hour every day for me, my wife, Kelly, and our kids." He continued, "When I experience God's favor, I get the feeling He is responding to my mom's prayers."

Braxton left college with more than a solid theological foundation and biblical worldview. He also met his

wife, Kelly, during his time at Southwestern/ACU. She was the younger sister of his basketball teammate and friend, Caleb Cernek. Kelly and Braxton married while they were both still students, and lived in married housing apartments while finishing school.

"We've been married 16 years and the Lord has gifted us with five children," Braxton said. "Kelly is kind and thoughtful. Her commitment to Christ challenges, encourages, and inspires me. The main thing for [us] during this season of our lives is imparting the teachings of Christ to our five kids, who are 11, 10, 7, 5, and 3 years old," he continued.

The Johnson family has also been generous supporters of what God is doing at ACU. In recognition of Braxton's professional, spiritual, and philanthropic leadership, the University was honored to recognize him as the 2022 Alumni of the Year at Homecoming last fall.

For someone who has reached nearly the pinnacle of his industry while still in his 30's, Braxton's most notable character trait might be his humility. When asked to share about himself for this article, rather than highlighting his professional accomplishments, Braxton consistently shifted the conversation to his love for the Lord, his firm foundation in God's word, the impact of the prayers of a faithful mother, and his primary ministry as a husband to Kelly and father to his five children.

In short, he's the embodiment of the four pillars of ACU's core values: Faith, Influence, Relationship, and Excellence (F.I.R.E.) and we're grateful that he's part of the Firestorm Family!

FIRESTORMFAMILY



1. **BREANA (FRANKS) JOHNSON ('14)** won the American Christian Fiction Writers Association's Genesis Contest in September of 2022. This is a national award for unpublished Christian novels in the romantic suspense category. Her novel, *Deadly Superstitions*, takes place in the Superstition Wilderness and is based on Arizona lore. Her husband, Benjamin (2013), is an Internal Medicine Resident at Creighton University Arizona Health Education Alliance in Phoenix.

2. **THOMAS SLAGER ('12)** is the Associate Lead Pastor at Highlands Church in Scottsdale. He is pictured here with Pastor Tim Reed and Dr. Kyle DiRoberts (2005), Chair and Professor of Biblical and Theological Studies at ACU and author of *The Secret to Prayer*.

3. **BRENDON ('08) AND ASHLEY (FELDICK) BECKER ('11), JILL (MOSCHGAT) BAILEY ('02),** and Pastor Tim Reed celebrate the promotion of **MATTHEW MOSCHGAT ('10)** from Army Captain to Major. Matthew serves in the United States Army as a United Nations Command Military Armistice Commission and works with the UN military arm that maintains the Korean Armistice Agreement in South Korea. He and his wife, Lydia, have been married 13 years and are parents to five children.

4. **TYLER CAWTHORNE AND SARA VANDERZEE ('16)** were married by Pastor Tim Reed in Prescott Valley in September 2022. Many ACU grads were in attendance to celebrate.

5



7



6



8



5. **NICK ('18) AND ALLISA (MILLER, '19) MCCORMICK** are coming up on their second wedding anniversary. They were married on June 18, 2021, in Sedona, Arizona. The McCormicks currently live in Naples, Florida, where Nick is an Assistant Baseball Coach at Ave Maria University. Allisa serves as the Marketing and Communications Manager at Champions for Learning, supporting teachers in their community. Both Nick and Allisa are pursuing a Master of Business Administration and will graduate in the near future. They are also new homeowners.
6. **KARLEIGH MCCLURE & ANDREW KEZELE ('15)** married on November 5, 2022. Pastor Tim Reed officiated the wedding ceremony. Andrew is the son of ACU Associate Professor of Biology, Dr. Joseph Kezele. Karleigh is a Registered Behavioral Technician at Scottsdale Pediatric Behavioral Services.
7. **BLAKE STEPHENS ('16)** and his wife, Chantel, were married on a yacht on the Hudson River in New York City in September 2022. Pastor Tim Reed officiated their wedding ceremony. Blake is an insurance sales agent at Kin Insurance.
8. **ALLIE (BLACKWOOD) EZELL ('15)** is living in Athens, AL with her husband, David, and their sons Cooper (2) and Bodhi—born in February 2023! David and Allie both work for the same school district where she teaches fifth grade and he teaches middle school Physical Education and is a varsity football coach. They are grateful for the opportunity to invest into the lives of children in their community—both in the classroom and on the football field. Allie is thankful for the foundation she gained at ACU, both professionally and spiritually.

CLASSNOTES

'20s

▼ **DAWSON LANDERS & SARAH COOPER ('22)** were married in January 2023. Both are recent ACU graduates and Pastor Tim Reed performed their wedding ceremony.



▼ **RJ OLMSTEAD AND CAMRYN DEGUTIS ('22)** were married in February 2023. RJ is the Executive Assistant to the Vice President of Academic Affairs at ACU and Cam works as a Resident Director on campus. They are both currently pursuing graduate degrees.



BILLY CARTER ('21) is in his fourth year serving as a youth ministry leader at Reunion Community Church. He is in his second year at Centennial High School, where he, teaches honors geometry, coaches cornerbacks on the varsity football team, and is the jump coach for track and field. He is also the sponsor for Centennial's Fellowship of Christian Athletes (FCA) and the Black Student Union (BSU). In November 2022, he was blessed to work with the San Diego Padres minor league team as a speed trainer for the fall camp. Billy said he is most proud of how God is allowing and using him to help lead youth to the Lord.

TRAVIS WALKER ('21) recently began working for Stryker, a medical device company. He and his wife are expecting their first child in the next few weeks.

▼ **ISIAH JACOBS ('20) & JULIANA BOYACHEK ('18)** married in March 2023 with Pastor Tim Reed officiating the ceremony.



BRENT SMITH ('20) is the Assistant Director of Student Engagement at ACU. He has also started his coaching career with the ACU softball team and is in the midst of his first full season on the staff.

QUIXMIA WASHINGTON ('20) is approaching her two-year anniversary as an online recruiter at ACU. Outside work, Q is working on her National Academy of Sports Medicine personal training certification and building an athletic clothing brand "Qourtside," through which she can train up and coming basketball players.

▼ **ELLIOTT ALEXANDER (22) & SARAH GRACE BURNS ('20)** married on December 23, 2022. Pastor Tim Reed officiated the ceremony.



▼ **AUSTIN & ANATASHA (COLEMAN, '17) NIZIOLEK ('20)** welcomed their baby girl, Airabella, in June 2022. Austin is a firefighter in Goodyear, Arizona.



'10s

ALEXANDRA "ALLY" BACHANOS ('19) is the Communications Director at Pure Heart Church and the Kinetic Director at Maven Media Productions.

BAYLOR GIANNINI ('19) completed a Master of Business Administration degree and is looking forward to getting married this upcoming Fall. He serves as the Head Baseball Coach at American Leadership Academy - West Foothills - Junior High and High School.

MELISHA BRYANT ALHAMBRA ('18) is an Early Childhood Specialist with AZ Health Zone, part of the Arizona Department of Health Services.

▼ **RUSSELL HENLEY-BUSSE ('18)** has been the Music Director at Central Christian Church in Gilbert since graduating from ACU in 2018. He has also worked on various music projects including, BONSTIN, RNE, CSM Music Culture, STOX, and ACU Worship. Russell married Sarah in January 2022 and together they are pursuing a life of ministry and creativity for the Kingdom.



JAY NORTON ('18) is the Youth Worship Leader at Scottsdale Bible Church.

DILLON EAVES ('18) is the Dean of Discipline at Scottsdale Christian Academy, a position he began in October 2022. He also coaches baseball for the school.

AUBREY (BEAMAN) GOLLNICK ('18) and her husband, Taylor, welcomed their first child, Ellie Grace, in March 2023. Aubrey serves as the Academic Records Specialist at ACU.

BRENNBA BAILEY ('17) is a Certified Personal trainer at Elite-U and a mother of two.

▼ **AUTUMN (WELLS) DEFFNER ('17)** and her husband, Griffin, welcomed their third child, Elliana Christine, in October 2022. Elliana was born the day before Autumn's birthday, which was a fun surprise and joined big brother, Jensen (4) and big sister, Isla (2). Autumn is the church administrator at River Church where Griffin serves as the worship pastor.



▼ **MEAGHEN NELSON ('17)** married David Bertucci in October 2022 in a ceremony officiated by Pastor Tim Reed.



JACOB RICHARDS ('17) is a judicial law clerk in the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit.

▼ **ZACHARY CRANE ('16)** married his wife, Ana, in an intimate ceremony officiated by Pastor Tim Reed on December 2, 2022 in Colorado Springs.



BRANDON PALACIO ('16) marks a decade this year as a member of the US Army Reserves. Currently, he is a Staff Sergeant working as a Civil Affairs Non-Commissioned Officer under the US Army Civil Affairs and Psychological Operations Command. Previously, he was in the Military Police for six years, where he spent a year during his time as a student at ACU mobilized to Guantanamo Bay in support of the Global War on Terror. In 2021, he spent nine months in Guatemala conducting Civil Affairs and Humanitarian Aid Operations with the host nation partners there and acted as secondary translator in Spanish for his team. In 2022, he studied Russian at the Defense Language Institute in California for a year, graduating with honors in early 2023. Currently, Brandon is back in Arizona and beginning work as a Department of Child Safety Specialist for the State of Arizona. In the near future he is determined to complete a Master's Degree in International Relations and/or Foreign Service.

DJ AND AMANDA (GARCIA) HOSKINSON ('16) settled in the Glendale area since meeting at ACU during their senior year and getting married shortly after graduation. Their careers eventually led them both back to working at ACU. DJ was recently promoted to be the Director of Student Success and Admission Operations within ACU's Enrollment Department. Amanda serves as an Admission's Recruiter for ACU's Traditional Students. They both love helping the next generation of Firestorm students succeed at ACU! They are also excited to be welcoming their first child, a baby boy, this August!

▼ **KAILAA HEANEY ('16)** married Chandler Levine in Chino Valley on October 7, 2022. Pastor Tim Reed was the Officiant. Kailaa is the owner of Heart Space Rentals, a company that specializes in providing settings for weddings and corporate events.



CHEYENNE (HUSKEY) DIPIETRO ('15) is an Occupational Therapist at ConnectEd Teletherapy.

TEVIN EDDY ('15) is the Worship Director at HiWay Baptist Church in Mesa. His wife, Alexis (Lexi) is a 2016 graduate of ACU.

MACKENZIE (WORDEN) VAN DER WERF ('15) is a math teacher in the Wake County Public School System. She and her husband, Alex, are expecting their first child.

▼ **MARCUS AND ALLIE (MCGLAUGHLIN, '15) HOOVER ('15)** welcomed their third child, Brexton, in December 2022, joining big brother, Declan (4) and big sister, Keely (2). Marcus started a new job over the summer as Stars Pastor/ Director of Coaching for CCV Surprise campus and Allie is a teacher in the Washington Elementary School District.



TREVOR SANTOR ('14) recently returned to Arizona and serves as Director of the Firestorm Recreation Center. He is teaching in the Sports Management Department at ACU, and is on the ACU baseball coaching staff. He is author of the book entitled, *Baseball Genesis – Living for Christ through the Game of Baseball*.

▼ **NICOLE (LA PLANTE) HUNTER ('13)** has served in youth ministry for over 20 years and has been teaching at Northwest Christian School for the past eight years. Her husband, Chuck (attended 1995), has been a teacher and a coach for many years and coached at ACU when both the Hunters' sons played volleyball at the University. Nicole is currently training a service dog to help students in need.



▼ **MARC LUCAS ('13)** served as a pastor for 15 years with two large churches in the Valley: Sun Valley Community Church and Highlands Church. He is currently the Local Ministry Director at Faith Talk 1360 KPXQ, part of the Salem Media Group, a growing powerhouse in the conservative media marketplace. Mark and his wife, Tammy, have been married for 16 years and have three children.



CLAIRE (SHORTSLEEVE) ATENIAN ('12) is a faculty member at Fuller Theological Seminary in the field of Marriage and Family Therapy.

GRACE LUGINBUHL ('12) has been serving at her church, Desert View Bible Church, for many years and recently was hired by the church as their Children's Ministry Director. She is excited that God is using her for His Kingdom work with the next generation.

▼ **ASHLEY (FELTDICK) BECKER ('11)** is a Pastor and Director of Worship and Communication at North Hills Church in Phoenix and has served there since 2014. She and her husband, Brendon (attended 2008), have three daughters.



JAMES DELARATO ('11) is the Men's and Marriage Pastor at the North Ridge campus of Scottsdale Bible Church.

NATE GREEN ('10) is the Worship Pastor at the Fountain Hills campus of Scottsdale Bible Church.

'00s

HOLLY (BARROWS) ACOSTA ('09) is a Lead Outpatient Physical Therapy Assistant at Summit Healthcare Services.

▼ **MICHAEL WERNER ('08)** is serving as the Vice President of Finance at ACU. His wife, Jenn, is a 2009 graduate of ACU. They have two daughters, Easley (age 11) and Brynn (age 8).



BRITTANY "BRITT" FULK ('06) is in her eighth year as Head Women's Basketball Coach and her 10th year of coaching at Paradise Valley High School. She also teaches Advanced PE, Life Concepts, and Weight Training.

JOSH KERR ('04) is the Family Pastor at First Southern Baptist Church of Scottsdale and married RaQuel earlier this year.

JASON & LINDA (1999) GREGG ('01) are back in the states and teaching at Valley Christian School in Chandler, after teaching, coaching, and ministering in Taiwan for 20 years.

JEREMY "JERRY" AND CORA (1998) MURRAY ('00) are very active in their church and community teaching Bible studies, swim classes, homeschooling, counseling, and meeting people's needs in the Tucson area. Jerry is a firefighter with Rincon Valley Fire District.

'90s

ROB MULARI ('99) is the Connections Pastor at Saguaro Canyon Church in Tucson. He has been involved in ministry for over 25 years in various capacities. He also served for over 10 years in the mental health field working in adolescent residential treatment centers in Arizona and Utah.

JIM BLACK ('98) is the Director of Next Steps and First Impressions at the Phoenix Campus of Dream City Church, where he has served for 22 years.

PHIL AND HEIDI KOOISTRA ('98) live in Bend, Oregon, where Phil is entering his 12th year as the Lead Pastor at Grace Bible Church. He is also working to complete his doctorate. Heidi has worked in education, at the church, and ministers to many in their community.

▼ **TONY BARTOLUCCI ('93)** and his daughter, Giana, were hit head on by a drunk driver on Christmas Eve 2015. Giana, who was only 14 at the time, was extensively injured and went to be with Jesus the following June. Tony and his wife, Lois, subsequently adopted two sisters, Lilly (14) and Jazmyynn (10). Tony has been serving since 2002 as preaching elder at Christ Church of Clarkson, a 207-year-old reformed congregation near Rochester, NY.



▼ **TOBY KENDRICK ('91)** and his wife, Cheryl, transferred to North Carolina about three years ago. Tony is a Market Sales Lead with Bimbo Bakeries USA, where he has worked for the last 25+ years. All three of the Kendricks' sons have graduated from college. Two are married, and the Kendricks have been blessed with one granddaughter. God has used Toby and Cheryl as lay leaders in their local church, as youth leaders, small group leaders, and God Encounter weekend leaders. Over the past five years, Toby has had an active role with "Perspectives on the World Christian Movement."



'70s

▼ **JIM COLYN ('70)** is the Director of NE India Baptist Missions and the President of Grace Baptist Bible College in Keithelmambi, Manipur, India.



'60s

KEN CULVER ('69) while retired, is still working in the music field. He currently resides in California.



INVEST IN CULTURAL TRANSFORMATION

by partnering with ACU

WOODS LEGACY SOCIETY

We are proud to announce the Woods Legacy Society named in honor of our first President, Dr. Wallace Woods (above). For information on how you can leave a legacy through an estate gift to ACU, contact Christopher Studenka at 602-489-5300 x1113.

THE PRESIDENT'S CIRCLE

Honoring those who give \$1,000 or more annually to
Arizona Christian University.

THE TOWER SOCIETY

Recognizing those who give monthly to Arizona Christian University.

VISIT ARIZONACHRISTIAN.EDU/GIVE