

# ATS schools continue to amaze

By TOM TANNER

*After 50 years in theological education, I'm still amazed at how God works in our schools. As I prepare to retire after 10 years at ATS as a director of accreditation, here are four things about ATS schools that continue to amaze me.*

My reflections are based on the following "Sayings of Agur" in Proverbs 30:18-19.

*There are three things too amazing for me, four that I do not understand:*

*The way of an eagle in the sky,  
the way of a snake on a rock,*

*The way of a ship on the ocean,  
and the way of a man with a woman.*

I agree with the writer Agur that these four things are too amazing to understand. But let me try by translating each of these four "ways" into wonderful moments I have experienced with ATS schools: (1) moments of soaring beauty, (2) moments of surprising survivability, (3) moments of amazing community, and (4) moments of touching humanity.

## **1** *The way of an eagle in the sky represents, for me, moments of soaring beauty.*

If you have ever watched an eagle soar, you can agree with Agur. There's just something breathtakingly beautiful about an eagle flying high in the sky. I'm told some eagles can soar for hours on end and reach heights of 20,000 feet. That is amazing. So are ATS schools when they "soar" and, after more than 100 visits, I have seen many of our member schools soar. Let me cite just one example. It was a visit to an ATS school in a large urban setting. The campus itself was beautiful but more so



were the people, especially the students. They represented 40 different denominations and 60 separate ethnicities. I will never forget one student's comment when asked about how the school navigated such diversity. She said, "We may be walking on different paths, but we are all walking in the same direction." That was a moment of soaring beauty for me.

## **2** *The way of a snake on a rock represents, for me, moments of surprising survivability.*

I understand you can find snakes in every country on earth except four: Iceland, Greenland, Ireland, and New Zealand. Snakes can survive just about anywhere—and make their way just about anywhere, even on rocks. To be sure, comparing theological schools to snakes on rocks is not my idea of a great metaphor, but Agur's reference here reminds me of just how resilient and adaptable our schools are. I remember one school that seemed "stuck on a rock," with not much hope for any movement. I hadn't been at ATS long when I visited this school that seemed to be not simply stuck, but stricken, in two. The committee had to do two sets of interviews with faculty and with students because both groups

were terribly divided. The school was “stuck between a rock and a hard place,” struggling to find a way forward. Now, nearly 10 years later, this school has not only survived but is finding new ways to move forward. I have seen countless ATS schools like theirs make their way through incredibly difficult circumstances. I continue to be amazed at their surprising survivability.

### **3** *The way of a ship on the ocean represents, for me, moments of amazing community.*

In the ancient world, navigating at sea was an “all hands on deck” experience. Solo sailors didn’t last long. The third century BCE ship called the *Syracusia*, for example, had a crew of several hundred. Acts 27 records Paul’s sea voyage with 276 souls on board, all finally working together and all finally saved together. To sail the seas in the days of Agur required teamwork and collaboration. I see that same kind of amazing community at work among ATS schools. I remember one school that had struggled for years with financial challenges, including an endowment deeply “underwater,” a huge mortgage, and an increasingly divided community. All of those trials took their tolls until new leadership found a way to get “all hands on deck.” Now, the school has paid back the endowment, paid off its mortgage, and has found ways to unite around a common mission and vision. This school, like so many others, found a way to navigate its storms at sea and find a way forward, all because of working together. I love those moments of amazing community.

### **4** *The way of a man with a woman represents, for me, moments of touching humanity.*

Agur uses words here that evoke images of romance, of deeply personal relationships. I learned early on in my time at ATS that accreditation is really about relationships, about getting to know the schools and interacting with them personally—on a human, not merely institutional, level. During my time at ATS, I have fallen in love with our schools and have witnessed many moments of deeply touching humanity. Let me tell you about one moment during a visit to a school that was

struggling. Finances were falling. Enrollment was down. Trust between faculty and trustees had taken a hit. The school’s new president, however, was slowly but surely rebuilding relationships.

A highlight of any accreditation visit is interviewing students. I’ll never forget the story one student there told us about why, despite its struggles, she loved this school. She was an older African American woman, a nurse. Both of her parents had recently been admitted to a local hospital facing serious health issues. She cared for them as best she could while pursuing her seminary education. One day, the hospital called to say that both had experienced serious setbacks and asked if she could come right away. She called her seminary professor to tell him she would miss class that day because she had to go to the hospital to see her parents. After tending to her mother, she made her way upstairs to her father’s room. When she opened his door, she saw her professor sitting by her father’s bed praying with him. She said that’s when she “lost it.” She couldn’t imagine this white professor driving to the hospital to pray with her parents. She said, “That’s why I love this school...because of people like him who care for students like me.” It was a moment of touching humanity.

After 50 years in theological education, I’m still amazed by moments like these. Allow me to add a fifth to Agur’s four amazing things:

*There are ~~three~~ four things too amazing for me,  
~~four~~ five that I do not understand:  
The way of an eagle in the sky,  
the way of a snake on a rock,  
The way of a ship on the ocean,  
the way of a man with a woman,  
And the ways of God with an ATS school.*



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