HOUSE, SENATE NEGOTIATORS REACH BUDGET DEAL

House and Senate negotiators unveiled an $85 billion agreement late Tuesday to fund federal agencies through the fall of 2015, averting another government shutdown and ending the cycle of crisis that has paralyzed Washington for much of the past three years.

In a rare display of bipartisan cooperation, House Budget Committee Chairman Paul Ryan (R-Wis.) stood side by side in the Capitol with Senate Budget Committee Chairman Patty Murray (D-Wash.) to announce the deal, which would cancel half of the sharp spending cuts known as the sequester for the current fiscal year.

“I am very proud to stand here today with Chairman Ryan to say that we have broken through the partisanship and gridlock and reached a bipartisan budget compromise,” Murray said, calling the agreement “an important step in helping to heal some of the wounds here in Congress and show we can do something without another crisis around the corner.”

Ryan called the agreement “a step in the right direction” that protects the Pentagon from fresh cuts set to hit in January while trimming deficits by more than $20 billion over the next decade.

With the deal already under fire from conservatives for weakening the sequester, Ryan argued that the package represents “a clear improvement on the status quo” by replacing one-time cuts to agency budgets with permanent savings from other programs.

In a “divided government” where Democrats control the White House and the Senate, Ryan reminded his critics, “you don’t always get what you want.”

The deal would not deliver a key demand of many Democrats, to extend unemployment insurance for the long-term jobless. While they pledged to keep fighting, senior Democrats acknowledged that checks are likely to be cut off at the end of the month for more than a million people, potentially undercutting the strengthening economic recovery.

But the agreement could provide an offsetting boost to the economy by returning a degree of normalcy to the Washington budget process and restoring confidence in the ability of Republicans and Democrats to work together after years of destabilizing strife.

“This agreement doesn’t include everything I’d like — and I know many Republicans feel the same way. That’s the nature of compromise,” President Obama said in a statement. “But it’s a good sign that
Democrats and Republicans in Congress were able to come together and break the cycle of short-sighted, crisis-driven-decision-making to get this done."

The deal was struck after weeks of private talks between Murray and Ryan, a political odd couple better known for advancing their parties’ agendas than for forging compromise. It represents an accomplishment and a risk for Ryan, who ran on the GOP presidential ticket in 2012 and still has White House aspirations.

Under the terms of the deal, spending for the Pentagon and other federal agencies would be set at $1.012 trillion for fiscal 2014, midway between the $1.058 trillion sought by Democrats and the $967 billion championed by Republicans. The Pentagon would get a $2 billion increase over last year, while domestic agencies would get a $22 billion bump, clearing space for administration priorities such as fresh investments in education and infrastructure. (Contributor: By Lori Montgomery for The Washington Post)

With budget appropriation decisions looming for the coming fiscal year, it is a relief to have at least a portion of the financial questions addressed with a non-partisan compromised settlement. Pray that there would be righteous agreements that support sound financial practices in this volatile economy. Pray that the Lord would grant His wisdom to those who are continuing to develop national budgetary decisions.

"If you lend money to one of my people among you who is needy, do not be like a moneylender; charge him no interest." (Exodus 22:25)

"Wisdom is a shelter as money is a shelter, but the advantage of knowledge is this: that wisdom preserves the life of its possessor." (Ecclesiastes 7:12)

"Suppose one of you wants to build a tower. Will he not first sit down and estimate the cost to see if he has enough money to complete it?" (Luke 14:28)

THE RIGHTEOUSNESS IN HOBBY LOBBY’S CAUSE

A little more than 20 years ago, Congress did something that, today, is hard to imagine. Lawmakers from both parties and across the political spectrum found common ground and passed, by a near-unanimous vote, the Religious Freedom Restoration Act, which firmly commits the federal government to protecting and promoting our "inalienable right" to freely exercise religion. As President Clinton remarked when he signed the legislation into law, "the power of God is such that even in the legislative process, miracles can happen."

Last week, the Supreme Court agreed to hear two cases that are testing the strength of this commitment. The arguments and decisions in the Hobby Lobby and Conestoga Wood lawsuits will say a lot about the health, and the future, of what Clinton called our “first freedom.”

These cases involve religious liberty challenges by two family businesses to the rule in the Affordable Care Act requiring employers to provide insurance coverage for contraception and some drugs that many believe can cause abortions.

The Green family has not confined its Christian beliefs to Sunday worship, and has instead expressed them through the operation of its Hobby Lobby stores for nearly 40 years. Similarly, the Hahn family’s Mennonite faith has animated and sustained its woodworking business for generations.
Like millions of religious believers and groups, these challengers reject the idea that religious faith and religious freedom are simply about what we believe and how we pray, and not also about how we live, act and work. At the heart of these two cases is the straightforward argument that federal law does not require us to “check our faith at the door” when we pursue vocations in business and commerce.

There should be no question about the sincerity of the religious beliefs at issue. These are not cases where the profit-focused managers of publicly traded mega-companies are cynically trying to save a few bucks or to gain a competitive edge.

As many would-be Sunday shoppers know, the Green family “walks the walk.” Signs on Hobby Lobby stores’ doors say that they close on Sundays “to allow employees time for worship and to spend time with their families.” Their stores do not carry shot glasses, lewd greeting cards or vulgar posters, and the background music is Christian. Hobby Lobby contributes generously to charities and starts full-time employees at nearly double the minimum wage. When the Greens and Hobby Lobby do this, and many other things, they are living out their faith and exercising their religion.

Hobby Lobby also provides excellent health insurance, which includes coverage for most — but not all — contraceptives. However, because of the Greens’ firm belief in the dignity of human life and about when and how it begins, Hobby Lobby cannot provide coverage for some of the required drugs because they could cause an abortion.

The government and others argue that the Greens’ religious beliefs are irrelevant because they’ve freely chosen to enter the rough-and-tumble world of commerce and that, in any event, the exercise of religion is for individuals, not corporations. But Hobby Lobby’s lawyers at the Becket Fund for Religious Liberty will be on solid ground when they explain to the court that both of these arguments are misguided.

The issue is not whether groups, associations and corporations have religious freedom rights under federal law. Of course they do. After all, religious hospitals, schools, social service agencies and churches are not “individuals,” but it would be bizarre to say that they don’t exercise religion.

And the question should not be whether legal protections for religious liberty stop at the sanctuary door or evaporate when a person is trying to make a living or a business is aiming to make a profit. At a time when we talk a lot about corporate responsibility and worry about the feeble influence of ethics and values on Wall Street decision-making, it would be strange if the law were to welcome sermonizing from Starbucks on the government shutdown but tell the Greens and Hobby Lobby to focus strictly on the bottom line.

The Religious Freedom Restoration Act reaffirmed an idea that is deeply rooted in America's history and traditions — namely, that politics and policy should respect and, whenever possible, make room for religious commitments and conscientious objections. True, religious liberty is not absolute, and, in a pluralistic society like ours, not all requests for exemptions and accommodations can, or should, be granted. Some religious liberty lawsuits will, and should, fail, but not simply because they involve what happens at work on Monday and not what happens in services on the Sabbath.

What Clinton said when he signed the act into law is worth remembering today: “Let us never believe that the freedom of religion imposes on any of us some responsibility to run from our convictions.” He challenged us instead to “bring our values back to the table of American discourse to heal our troubled land.” The Greens and Hobby Lobby, by refusing to check their faith at the marketplace door, are doing just that.
Richard W. Garnett is a professor of law at the University of Notre Dame. (Contributor: By Richard W. Garnett for the LA Times)

Our call here is “Intercessors, unite!” We know from many biblical references that God wants His people to persevere in prayer and not grow faint or become weary in well-doing. He also values unity among His people (Psalm 133) and thus, unified intercession. “Father God, Your Word teaches us to support and respect human government but also to obey the principles of your Word above all else. We thank you for government protections that allow us to live peaceable lives. But now we see our God-given religious freedoms eroding, as our government is supporting new laws that stand against Your Word. We pray that Your Holy Spirit will oversee the upcoming Supreme Court hearings in early 2014 with regard to Hobby Lobby and Conestoga Wood, two Christian-run companies that will not violate long-held biblical beliefs now in direct conflict with Obamacare regulations. We dare to pray for Your sovereign intervention in this case so that the Court renders a 9-0 decision. Amen!” Intercessors, please follow closely and keep praying.

“Then He spoke a parable to them, that men always ought to pray and not lose heart, saying: ‘There was in a certain city a judge who did not fear God nor regard man. Now there was a widow in that city; and she came to him, saying, ‘Get justice for me from my adversary.’ And he would not for a while; but afterward he said within himself, ‘Though I do not fear God nor regard man, yet because this widow troubles me I will avenge her, lest by her continual coming she weary me.’” Then the Lord said, ‘Hear what the unjust judge said. And shall God not avenge His own elect who cry out day and night to Him, though He bears long with them? I tell you that He will avenge them speedily. Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will He really find faith on the earth?’” (Luke 18:1-6)

“Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity! It is like the precious oil upon the head, running down on the beard, the beard of Aaron, running down on the edge of his garments. It is like the dew of Hermon, descending upon the mountains of Zion; for there the LORD commanded the blessing—Life forevermore.” (Psalm 133)

ACTIVISTS URGE OBAMA TO SIDESTEP CONGRESS

President Obama’s repeated use of presidential powers is causing a tough problem — his own supporters now expect him to use it to achieve everything they want.

From immigration to the minimum wage, congressional Democrats and liberal activists this week urged Mr. Obama to declare an end run around Capitol Hill, assert executive authority and make as much progress as he can on the expansive agenda he laid out for his second term.

A day after Mr. Obama denounced income inequality, progressive lawmakers said he should take the lead by issuing an executive order requiring all federal contractors to pay workers more than the minimum wage. A dozen lawmakers and immigration activists held a news conference outside the Capitol on Thursday asking him to halt all deportations as a down payment on an eventual immigration bill.

“To not use his executive authority is not just unstrategic; it is cruel,” said Tania Unzueta, a strategist with the National Day Laborer Organizing Network.

On immigration, Mr. Obama raised expectations when, after years of denying he had such powers, he issued a policy last year saying he no longer would deport young illegal immigrants, the “Dreamers” who were brought to the U.S. as minors by their parents and are considered the most sympathetic cases. He said he was using prosecutorial discretion.
More than two dozen House Democrats have written a letter to Mr. Obama saying he can expand that authority to encompass nearly all 11 million illegal immigrants.

Presidents regularly claim broad powers, and Mr. Obama’s own list of assertions is long. He committed the U.S. to military action in Libya without congressional authorization, he has tweaked interpretations to education, welfare and health care laws, and he has tested the limits of his recess appointment powers in a case that is pending before the Supreme Court.

Mr. Obama’s base, though, wants to see more — as he learned last week on a trip to the West Coast, where he was met with hecklers.

One man interrupted the president’s immigration speech to urge him to halt all deportations, just as he did for the Dreamers. Mr. Obama said he didn’t have that much power.

Hours later, as Mr. Obama ticked off his agenda at a Democratic National Committee fundraiser, a man in the audience repeatedly called out “executive order.”

“Somebody keeps on yelling, ‘Executive order.’ Well, I’m going to actually pause on this issue because a lot of people have been saying this lately on every problem, which is, just sign an executive order, and we can pretty much do anything and basically nullify Congress,” the president said — immediately drawing approving applause from his audience.

“Wait, wait, wait, before everybody starts clapping — that’s not how it works,” Mr. Obama said. “We got this Constitution. We got this whole thing about separation of powers and branches.”

Jim Manley, a Democratic strategist, said Mr. Obama telegraphed this year that he would use presidential powers when he ran into problems getting his agenda through Congress.

“In light of Republican obstructionism, it should be no surprise to anyone that the administration is moving more and more toward executive action,” Mr. Manley said. “The problem, however, is you can do a lot more via the legislative process than you can do through executive orders.”

Mr. Obama’s allies argue that Republicans have forced the confrontation by refusing to even debate the president’s agenda.

They point to the House GOP’s reluctance to bring an immigration bill to the floor, and to repeated efforts to overturn Obamacare and the president’s environmental policies.

Those last two moves have left Mr. Obama to act on his own.

On Thursday, he issued a memo to the heads of all federal departments and agencies telling them that by 2020, 20 percent of the energy they use must come from renewable resources such as wind or solar. That is more than twice the current rate.

On health care, Mr. Obama has made numerous interpretations that seem to conflict with his own law, including unilaterally suspending the employer mandate, deciding Americans can get subsidies even if they aren’t in state-run health care exchanges, and most recently ruling that states still could approve insurance plans even if they violate the law.

Administration officials said that last move relied on prosecutorial discretion — the same authority the president cited for halting deportations of Dreamers.
Presidents argue that they are allowed to interpret the laws, and President George W. Bush regularly issued signing statements laying out how he saw the laws Congress passed.

Mr. Obama criticized that practice and hasn’t issued anywhere near the number of signing statements, but analysts said he is still stretching the limits of his power by usurping Congress and the courts.

“The problem of what the president is doing is that he is not simply posing a danger to the constitutional system; he is becoming the very danger the Constitution was designed to avoid: that is, the concentration of power in any single branch,” said Jonathan Turley, a law professor at George Washington University, testifying about executive powers to the House Judiciary Committee this week.

“We’ve had the radical expansion of presidential powers under both President Bush and President Obama. We have what many once called an imperial presidency model of largely unchecked authority,” Mr. Turley said. “And with that trend, we also have the continued rise of this fourth branch. We have agencies that are now quite large that issue regulations.”

Nowhere is the fight more acute than on immigration, where activists have taken to blocking detention facilities and chaining themselves to buses to try to halt deportations.

Mr. Obama has carved nearly 500,000 Dreamers out of deportation, but the activists want a broader halt — at least to include the parents of the Dreamers.

Rep. Raul M. Grijalva, the Arizona Democrat who led Thursday’s rally outside the Capitol, said while it’s probably true the president can’t halt all deportations, he can take some more steps, such as not applying the full 10-year bar of admission to those who enter the country illegally.

“He’s probably legally correct saying, ‘I can’t do that, are you crazy?’ But OK, what are the options?” he said. “The first time we approached him on the Dreamers: ‘No, can’t do that, I don’t have the power.’ We think there are options that do extend the power.” (Contributor: By Stephen Dinan for The Washington Times)

This article should bring out the best in intercessors, primarily because the issues are clear and the stakes so high—and all the power to make change must originate with God. It is a time for courage and strength in our prayers, not for shrinking back in fear or wondering whether Christians who value freedom have any recourse. We do, of course, have spiritual strength through the power of prayer. Pray for restraint in presidential executive orders and a return to balance among the branches, just as the Framers set out in the U.S. Constitution. Historians remember that at the close of the Constitutional Convention in 1787, Benjamin Franklin was asked, “What kind of government have you given us, Dr. Franklin?” He replied: “A republic, if you can keep it.” The specific aim of the Founders was freedom for the people, restraint of federal government, and that no president have unchecked powers. Our weapons, in prayer, are mighty in God to pull down spiritual strongholds. Pray for a return to our roots and for righteous government leaders to be elected to public office. Pray for a nationwide revival, with hearts turning to God and transformation in many communities.

“For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind.” (2 Tim. 1:7)

“For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh. For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ.” (2 Cor. 10:3-5)
“Seek the LORD while He may be found, call upon Him while He is near. Let the wicked forsake his way, And the unrighteous man his thoughts; let him return to the LORD, and He will have mercy on him; and to our God, for He will abundantly pardon.” (Isaiah 55:6-7)

**BIG COMPANIES EXPANDING GAY RIGHTS**

Corporate support for gay and transgender rights is reaching workers in new corners of the country and economy six months after the U.S. Supreme Court struck down the federal Defense of Marriage Act, according to a new report card from the nation’s largest LGBT advocacy group.

The Human Rights Campaign found that more than two-thirds of Fortune 500 companies and 90 percent of all large employers it surveyed are offering health insurance and other spousal benefits to same-sex domestic partners of their employees.

Wal-Mart Stores Inc., Hormel Foods LLC and Wendy's International Inc. are among the corporations extending the benefits for the first time next year, the campaign says in a report scheduled to be issued Monday.

The group's 12th annual Corporate Equality Index, which rates private companies on policies affecting gay and transgender workers and consumers, also found a record number of businesses adopting policies prohibiting discrimination against transgender workers and job applicants. They include 61 percent of the Fortune 500, up from 57 percent a year ago, and 86 percent of the 737 companies evaluated.

With same-sex marriages still outlawed in 34 states and without a federal law prohibiting workplace discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity, the ratings suggest that big businesses are helping to fill a gap in rights and recognition, said Deena Fidas, who directs the campaign's Workplace Equality Program. That companies like the Cracker Barrel restaurant chain and discount retailer Dollar General, both headquartered in Tennessee, started sponsoring gay rights events and working to raise their marks on the index this year is as much a bellwether as the 303 employers that received perfect scores, Fidas said.

"There is no more succinct way to say we have arrived than the Wal-Mart story," she said. "The stores and restaurants that you find across strip malls and along highways in every pocket of the country and that are serving demographics that are more senior in age and more rural, cutting across what conventional wisdom would tell you, are places where you now find LGBT-inclusion."

Arkansas-based Wal-Mart, the nation's largest private employer, announced in August that it would extend its health care benefits to its full-time U.S. workers' domestic partners, including those of the same sex, starting Jan. 1. The company said it was making the change not as a political or moral decision but because it wanted to have one uniform policy for all 50 states at a time when some states have their own definitions of domestic partnerships and civil unions.

Bi-Lo Holdings LLC, the South Carolina-based parent company of the southern supermarket chains BI-LO and Winn-Dixie, started offering same-sex domestic partner benefits and health coverage to its workers in 2012, which first attracted notice when the company voluntarily submitted the information to the Human Rights Campaign this year.
“Offering same-sex partner coverage directly aligns with the company's diversity and inclusion practices and is part of our strategy to recruit and retain top talent,” said Brian Wright, vice president of communications for Bi-Lo Holdings.

The demise of the Defense of Marriage Act, which prohibited the federal government from recognizing marriages not between a man and a woman, has both directly and indirectly required large employers who had not already done so to acknowledge their gay employees and their families.

After the Supreme Court struck down a critical provision of the act, the Internal Revenue Service and the U.S. Labor Department ruled this fall that widows and widowers who had legally married were entitled to a late same-sex spouse’s pension benefits even if they lived in a state that bans gay marriages. The decision has compelled companies to make sure they are in compliance and develop procedures for verifying eligibility.

"The most conservative employer in the world who has no interest in doing this is now legally required to do this," said Todd Solomon, a Chicago lawyer who specializes in employee benefits.

The high court ruling also puts large, multi-state employers with self-funded health plans at risk of being sued for discrimination if they deny coverage to the lawful same-sex spouses of their employees, and many have since decided to offer coverage not only to married gay couples, but those in civil unions or domestic partnerships, Solomon said.

"Large employers are very squeamish about limiting benefits to spouses ... because it's unfair to those who say, live in Georgia and would have to spend several thousand dollars to jump on a plane and fly to New York or New Hampshire to get a marriage license," he said. "There is no way that company is going to limit benefits just to married couples because until marriage is legal in all 50 states, somebody is not getting compensated equally and companies are really, really anxious about treating employees differently."

The campaign also scores companies on "public commitment" — whether businesses directly appeal to the gay and lesbian community through advertising, philanthropy, recruiting, contracting, and advocacy on issues such as gay marriage. This year, 79 percent of the rated companies received credit in that category.

The trend concerns Chris Stone, a North Carolina brand strategist who evaluates companies on their compatibility with Christian biblical values for his website, the Faith Driven Consumer.

For the second year in a row, Stone has issued a Christmas buyer's guide that detracts points from major retailers that support Planned Parenthood or have been outspoken advocates of same-sex marriage and job discrimination protections for gay workers.

"The LGBT community is here, and they are going to be here. They have been here since the beginning of time and we are not trying to push them out of the marketplace," Stone said. "But ... we are trying to establish our own place within the marketplace as well." (Contributor: By Lisa Leff for Associated Press and The Huffington Post)

Let us pray with biblical goals, knowing what results to expect. Readers of these alerts know we do not see intercessory prayer as a formula or mystical wish list whereby we pray and society changes. With full respect for intercession—and it has deep biblical meaning and powerful influence with God—we do not have a New Testament mandate that promises prayer (alone) will change the world. Jesus sent the 11, later 12 again, into the face of Roman imperialism with the
directive to preach the Gospel, make disciples, see them baptized, then taught His commands in local assemblies—all with the view that His approach would be replicated by the next generation of believers. He achieved His goals; the Roman Empire is gone, while the Church remains. Today, our potential “audience” includes all those who need the peace and inner restoration that only the grace of God in Christ can impart, whether straight people, homosexual males, lesbian women, or those who refused to be categorized. Let us pray for them, to be sure, but let us also extend the love of God and the message of the Gospel’s redeeming power. Are you adding a kind word of witness to your prayers? The Scriptures below name heinous sins, but the focus is not on what we were in our sinfulness, but what we have become through grace.

[Jesus said,] “Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light.” (Matthew 11:28-30)

“Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived. Neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals, nor sodomites, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners will inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you. But you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God.” (1 Cor. 6:9-11)

LEGAL PERSONHOOD SOUGHT FOR CHIMPS

A U.S. animal rights group on Monday filed what it said is the first lawsuit seeking to establish the “legal personhood” of chimpanzees.

The nonprofit Nonhuman Rights Project asked a New York state court to declare Tommy, a 26-year-old chimp, “a cognitively complex autonomous legal person with the fundamental legal right not to be imprisoned.”

The lawsuit seeks a declaration that Tommy’s “detention” in a “small, dank, cement cage in a cavernous dark shed” in central New York is unlawful and demands his immediate release to a primate sanctuary.

Tommy’s owners, Patrick and Diane Lavery, kept the chimp at a used trailer lot in Gloversville, about 50 miles northwest of Albany, the group said.

Besides Tommy, the lawsuit also represents three other chimps: Kiko, a 26-year-old chimp living on a private property in Niagara Falls, and Hercules and Leo, two young male chimps used in research at Stony Brook University on Long Island, the group said. (Contributed by The Washington Post)

How to pray? Some will take this as a joke, but there is a deeper concern here than simply the well-being of four chimpanzees. No rational person wants any animal mistreated or made to suffer undue pain or distress. And yes, the arguments for and against the use of test animals in medical research, for example, have been debated for decades. However, let’s look more deeply at the lawsuit to establish “legal personhood” for the chimps. Much of this rallying to “animal rights” stems from a flawed worldview steeped in and growing out of Darwinian evolutionary theory. Instead of seeing God as Creator and humans as made in God’s image, certain levels of thought in today’s culture will promote elevating chimps, yet vote for killing innocent, defenseless babies in the womb. Such inequities can and will only be righted by divine intervention into a society that worships the creature more than the Creator. Pray accordingly.
“For since the creation of the world [God’s] invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse, because, although they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God, nor were thankful, but became futile in their thoughts, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Professing to be wise, they became fools, and changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like corruptible man—and birds and four-footed animals and creeping things. Therefore God also gave them up to uncleanness, in the lusts of their hearts, to dishonor their bodies among themselves, who exchanged the truth of God for the lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen.” (Romans 1:20-25)

**TEMPLE MOUNT, DREAMS OF PRAYER RAISE FEARS OF VIOLENCE**

A small but growing movement by Jewish activists demanding the right to pray at the site of their destroyed temple, in the heart of this disputed capital’s Old City, is creating a potentially explosive clash with the Muslim world, which considers the spot holy and bans Jews from public worship there.

Each week, hundreds of Jews ascend the creaky wooden ramp built above the Western Wall and enter what is often called the most contested real estate on Earth. Many then embark upon a game of hide-and-seek with their police escorts — whispering forbidden prayers while pretending to talk into cellphones, and getting in quick but banned bows by dropping coins and then bending to pick them up.

Their proposals, long dismissed as extremist, are now being debated in the Israeli parliament and embraced by an expansionist wing in the ruling coalition government of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

These political leaders, many in Netanyahu’s party, want Israel to assert more, not less, control over the West Bank, East Jerusalem and the Old City, including the place known to Jews as the Temple Mount and to Muslims as Haram al-Sharif, or the Noble Sanctuary.

“We’re looking for it to be divided between Jews and Muslims,” said Aviad Visoli, chairman of the Temple Mount Organizations, which claims 27 groups under its umbrella. “Today, Jews realize the Western Wall is not enough. They want to go to the real thing.”

Two millennia ago, this place was the site of the Jews’ Second Temple, destroyed in A.D. 70 by Roman legions under Titus, who cast the Jews into exile. The Western Wall, visited by 10 million people a year, is part of the remaining rampart built around the raised temple complex. Together, the wall and the site of the destroyed temple are the holiest landmarks in Judaism.

The same courtyard is home to al-Aqsa mosque, one of the oldest in Islam, and the Dome of the Rock, the golden landmark where tradition says the prophet Mohammad made his night journey to heaven.

For Palestinians and much of the Muslim world, any mention of changing the status quo at the site, the third-holiest in Islam, is incendiary. Protecting al-Aqsa has been a rallying cry for generations.

“This place belongs to the Muslim people, and no others have the right to pray here,” said Sheik Azzam al-Khatib, director of the Waqf, the Islamic trust that administers the site. Khatib said the mosque is a unifying symbol for the world’s 1.2 billion Muslims.

“If they try to take over the mosque, this will be the end of time,” Khatib warned. “This will create rage and anger not only in the West Bank but all over the Islamic world — and only God knows what will happen.”
The site, like all of Jerusalem’s Old City, was under Jordanian control until 1967, when it was captured by Israel during the Six-Day War. The Waqf administers and protects the site. Israeli police also patrol the area and accompany Jewish visitors while they visit.

Non-Muslim tourists are welcome to wander freely around the grounds. But non-Muslim prayer is forbidden. Jews in religious garb are taken aside at the entrance by Israeli security officers, screened more closely and sternly warned not to pray, bow, sing, tear their clothes in mourning or display any religious items.

Israel’s Chief Rabbinate has ruled that Jews should not enter the Temple Mount esplanade, for fear they will accidentally walk upon ground that is part of the Holy of Holies, the inner sanctum of the temple, where the Ark of the Covenant was kept and only the high priest was permitted to enter.

But political leaders are urging that this stance be reexamined. Rabbi Eli Ben-Dahan, deputy minister of religious affairs, has proposed giving Jews an hour a day to pray there.

“There is a growing reality among sectors of the population who want to go up there and pray, and there are rabbis who are encouraging their followers to do so,” Ben-Dahan said at a November committee hearing on the matter in the Knesset, Israel’s parliament. “The rabbinate needs to recognize this reality.’’

War of words

The hearing quickly devolved into a shouting match. “Every citizen of Israel should have the right to pray at their holy sites without harassment or being attacked,” said Miri Regev, the committee chairwoman. “If Jews want to go up to the Temple Mount to pray, they should have that right.”

“There is no such thing as the Temple Mount!” interrupted an Arab Israeli parliamentarian, Jamal Zahalka. “It does not exist. It is not there. ”

Legislators hurled shouts of “Barbarian!” and “Fascist!”

Arab Israeli lawmakers stormed out in protest.

“Because of your games at the al-Aqsa mosque, a third intifada could erupt,” Ahmad Tibi, deputy speaker of the Knesset and leader of the Arab political party Ta’al, told Regev. “You are a dangerous woman — to yourself, your children and all of us. Enough of playing with fire!”

In 2000, in the aftermath of failed peace negotiations mediated by President Bill Clinton, Israeli politician Ariel Sharon — campaigning to become prime minister — visited the Temple Mount with an escort of 1,000 police officers.

Some analysts say the visit sparked the second Palestinian uprising, often referred to as the al-Aqsa Intifada. Others claim that Palestine Liberation Organization leader Yasser Arafat was looking for an excuse to unleash the uprising and found one in Sharon’s action. In a report by former U.S. senator and peace negotiator George P. Mitchell, Sharon’s visit was called “poorly timed” and “provocative.” But the report said Israel’s use of lethal force against rioters in subsequent demonstrations had a greater negative effect.

Today, as yet another round of U.S.-brokered Israeli-Palestinian peace talks are underway, Khatib and other Islamic clerics warn that proposals to grant “time and space” to Jews looking to pray on the Temple Mount could ignite a holy war.
The clerics say they have pleaded with Israeli police to limit the number of Jews allowed to visit the site and warned that Jewish extremists are trying to change a delicate status quo and create new facts on the ground.

Uri Ariel, Israel’s minister of construction and housing, told reporters after a recent visit: “The Temple Mount is ours, and it cannot be argued about or negotiated. . . . It must be open for prayer at every hour, to every Jew.”

‘This is our job as Jews’

On a recent weekday morning, a dozen Jews led by an activist rabbi assembled at Mughrabi Gate to enter the Temple Mount. Because they had skullcaps and some had long beards and were wearing religious garments, they were escorted by armed Israeli police and trailed by three escorts from the Waqf.

Several times, one of the escorts pointed at a Jewish visitor and said to the police, “Watch that one!” or “Hey! Is he praying?” The atmosphere was tense, but the group was allowed to slowly meander its way around the compound.

“When we come here, it is very uncomfortable. They look at us as if we are serial killers,” said David Nashbaum, a father of six who was born to American parents and raised in Jerusalem. “This is our job as Jews, to come here and pray. I don’t know what they are so afraid of.”

The Israeli Supreme Court has ruled that Jews are allowed to pray at the Temple Mount, but the court also grants the Israeli police power to curtail any activities that would create “a disturbance to the public order.”

Jews who sing the national anthem or religious songs, and who pray, are regularly detained and escorted away.

A frequent visitor to the site is Rabbi Chaim Richman, a director of the Temple Institute, whose mission is to prepare for the building of the Third Temple where the Dome of the Rock now stands.

He says he envisions a new temple rising toward the clouds, with underground parking, Internet connectivity, radiant heating for the sanctified floors (the priests, in accordance with Jewish law, will be barefoot), and a return of burnt offerings and animal sacrifice.

In April, Richman’s Temple Institute moved to a large, renovated space in the Old City’s Jewish Quarter, overlooking the Western Wall. The project was funded by Henry Swieca, the billionaire American investor, and his wife, Estee.

Inside, researchers and artisans have created silver trumpets, wooden lyres and three-pronged forks that would turn over burnt offerings. They sewed a priest’s robe with a breastplate of golden thread and 12 precious stones, as described in the Bible and representing the 12 tribes of Israel. There is a golden menorah and an ark for the covenants. And there are architectural plans. Evidence, Muslim leaders say, that proves that the Jews have literal designs on the mount.

“This is not incitement,” Richman said. “Our mission is to kindle the spark of desire for the time when Jews are a light unto the world, and Muslims will agree it is time to rebuild, and all nations of the world will come to the Jews and ask them to rebuild.” (Contributors: By William Booth and Ruth Eglash for The Washington Post - Sufian Taha contributed to this report.)
How to pray? This detailed, poignant report touches all Christian believers’ hearts, as it portrays the conflict of praying for Israel and for the peace of Jerusalem, yet knowing that the full blessing and peace the nation of Israel seeks—and that all Israelis yearn for—will continue to elude them until there is a national return to the Lord and a commitment to walk in His ways and inherit His promises through recognition of Jesus as Messiah. Until then, let us return to the obvious passage, given by God through King David’s worshiping heart, Psalm 122. David could not have known the full prophetic extent and meaning of these words he sang to the Lord in his day.

“I was glad when they said to me, ‘Let us go into the house of the LORD.’ Our feet have been standing within your gates, O Jerusalem! Jerusalem is built as a city that is compact together, where the tribes go up, the tribes of the L ORD, to the Testimony of Israel, to give thanks to the name of the L ORD. For thrones are set there for judgment, the thrones of the house of David. ‘Pray for the peace of Jerusalem: May they prosper who love you. Peace be within your walls, and prosperity within your palaces.’ For the sake of my brethren and companions, I will now say, ‘Peace be within you.’ Because of the house of the L ORD our God I will seek your good.” (Psalm 122:1-9)

[God speaking to Abram, calling him out of Ur to a land to be shown to him and given to him and his descendents in a future day:] ”I will bless those who bless you, and I will curse him who curses you; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” (Genesis 12:3)

BAKERS SUPPORTERS STAND BY HIS REFUSAL TO ASSIST GAY WEDDING – WT TODAY

Jack Phillips serves any number of gay customers at the Masterpiece Cakeshop, and he’ll sell them just about anything they want: cookies, brownies, birthday cakes, you name it.

But when Charlie Craig and David Mullins asked him in June to make them a wedding cake for their same-sex marriage reception, he declined, citing his religious beliefs. For that, Mr. Phillips may soon be out of business.

State administrative law judge Robert N. Spencer issued a ruling Friday in favor of the gay couple, ordering Mr. Phillips to “cease and desist discriminating against complainants and other same-sex couples by refusing to sell them wedding cakes or any other product [he] would provide to heterosexual couples.”

The decision was hailed by gay-rights advocates, including Mr. Mullins, who said that the episode was “offensive and dehumanizing especially in the midst of arranging what should be a joyful family celebration.”

“No one should fear being turned away from a public business because of who they are,” said Mr. Mullins in a statement posted on the ACLU of Colorado website.

Alliance Defending Freedom attorneys representing Mr. Phillips argue that the ruling misses the point. They say it’s not a question of whether Mr. Phillips discriminated against a gay couple, but whether the government can force him to say something he doesn’t want to say.

“He can’t violate his conscience in order to collect a paycheck,” attorney Nicolle Martin told The Associated Press. “If Jack can’t make wedding cakes, he can’t continue to support his family. And in order to make wedding cakes, Jack must violate his belief system.”
Creating a wedding cake isn’t the same as baking a cookie: It’s a creative endeavor that communicates a message from the artist, like taking a photograph or designing a gown, she said.

“If the service or the product is expressive, if it sends a message, and the government says you have to make it, create it, and carry it for someone else, that is forced speech,” Ms. Martin told KNUS-AM talk-show host Peter Boyles.

Ms. Martin also warned that “this is just the first step.”

“If they can make Jack speak someone else’s message when they want it spoken and where they want it spoken, that is a government that we should all fear,” she said.

The judge disagreed, saying, “Respondents have no free speech right to refuse because they were only asked to bake a cake, not make a speech.”

Mr. Boyles, who has championed the bakery’s cause even though he supports gay marriage, said the case should alarm anyone concerned about government’s ability to control expression.

“It’s about the government telling you what you’re supposed to feel and believe. It doesn’t have anything to do with gay or straight,” said Mr. Boyles on Thursday’s program. “This is about this man’s right to say no, and what comes from that. This is what political correctness, authoritarianism is all about.”

The judge ruled that the bakery had violated the state’s public-accommodations statute, which forbids discrimination based on sexual orientation. Ms. Martin argued that the First Amendment should trump a state law.

“Just because you open a business doesn’t mean you set up a First Amendment-free zone,” Ms. Martin said. “There’s just no law or Supreme Court precedent that says when you engage in a commercial activity, you lose your free-speech rights.”

The ADF, which is considering filing an appeal, has a similar case in the pipeline. In August, the New Mexico Supreme Court ruled against Elaine Photography, whose owners had refused to take photos at a same-sex commitment ceremony. Their attorneys have asked the U.S. Supreme Court to hear the case.

Neither Colorado nor New Mexico recognizes same-sex marriage. The Colorado men filing the complaint were married in Massachusetts, one of 16 states that, along with the District of Columbia, perform same-sex marriages.

Amanda C. Goad, staff attorney with the ACLU Lesbian Gay Bisexual and Transgender Project, said that while “religious freedom is important, no one’s religious beliefs make it acceptable to break the law by discriminating against prospective customers.”

“No one is asking Masterpiece’s owner to change his beliefs, but treating gay people differently because of who they are is discrimination plain and simple,” she said in a statement. (Contributor: By Valerie Richardson for The Washington Times)

How to pray? This is a confusing time in our nation, a time when we must look at some uncomfortable biblical truths. Bad things do happen to good people. Remember, our Lord predicted His followers would, in fact, suffer persecution—and perhaps worse. Intercessors must remind themselves that, to paraphrase an automobile advertising campaign of a generation ago, “This isn’t your father’s America.” Battle lines are being drawn sharply and severely between light and darkness and between truth and a lie. Some in our society not only flaunt their deviant views
on marriage and sexuality but will chastise and punish fellow citizens who disagree based on biblical convictions. Two worldviews—indeed, two kingdoms—are locked in conflict, and it might require big steps of faith to remember that God’s kingdom is the one that will not be shaken. Pray that Christians can recognize that God doesn’t vindicate His people in every battle. There are suffering Christians around the world, and we have no guarantee that Christians who will not compromise righteous convictions will not suffer similarly right here at home. Are we prepared?

“These things I have spoken to you, that you should not be made to stumble. They will put you out of the synagogues; yes, the time is coming that whoever kills you will think that he offers God service. And these things they will do to you because they have not known the Father nor Me. But these things I have told you, that when the time comes, you may remember that I told you of them.” (John 16:1-4a)

“These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world.” (John 16:33)

“But you have carefully followed my doctrine, manner of life, purpose, faith, longsuffering, love, persecutions, persecutions, afflictions, which happened to me at Antioch, at Iconium, at Lystra—which persecutions I endured….Yes, and all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution.” (2 Timothy 3:10-12)

TECH GIANTS ISSUE CALL FOR LIMITS ON GOVERNMENT SURVEILLANCE OF USERS

Eight prominent technology companies, bruised by revelations of government spying on their customers’ data and scrambling to repair the damage to their reputations, are mounting a public campaign to urge President Obama and Congress to set new limits on government surveillance.

On Monday the companies, led by Google and Microsoft, presented a plan to regulate online spying and urged the United States to lead a worldwide effort to restrict it. They accompanied it with an open letter, in the form of full-page ads in national newspapers, including The New York Times, and a website detailing their concerns.

It is the broadest and strongest effort by the companies, often archrivals, to speak with one voice to pressure the government. The tech industry, whose billionaire founders and executives are highly sought as political donors, forms a powerful interest group that is increasingly flexing its muscle in Washington.

“It’s now in their business and economic interest to protect their users’ privacy and to aggressively push for changes,” said Trevor Timm, an activist at the Electronic Frontier Foundation. “The N.S.A. mass-surveillance programs exist for a simple reason: cooperation with the tech and telecom companies. If the tech companies no longer want to cooperate, they have a lot of leverage to force significant reform.”

The political push by the technology companies opens a third front in their battle against government surveillance, which has escalated with recent revelations about government spying without the companies’ knowledge. The companies have also been making technical changes to try to thwart spying and have been waging a public-relations campaign to convince users that they are protecting their privacy.

“People won’t use technology they don’t trust,” Brad Smith, Microsoft’s general counsel, said in a statement. “Governments have put this trust at risk, and governments need to help restore it.”
Apple, Yahoo, Facebook, Twitter, AOL and LinkedIn joined Google and Microsoft in saying that they believed in governments’ right to protect their citizens. But, they said, the spying revelations that began last summer with leaks of National Security Agency materials by Edward J. Snowden showed that “the balance in many countries has tipped too far in favor of the state and away from the rights of the individual.”

The Obama administration has already begun a review of N.S.A. procedures in reaction to public outrage. The results of that review could be presented to the White House as soon as this week.

“Having done an independent review and brought in a whole bunch of folks — civil libertarians and lawyers and others — to examine what’s being done, I’ll be proposing some self-restraint on the N.S.A., and you know, to initiate some reforms that can give people more confidence,” Mr. Obama said Thursday on the MSNBC program “Hardball.”

While the Internet companies fight to maintain authority over their customers’ data, their business models depend on collecting the same information that the spy agencies want, and they have long cooperated with the government to some extent by handing over data in response to legal requests.

The new principles outlined by the companies contain little information and few promises about their own practices, which privacy advocates say contribute to the government’s desire to tap into the companies’ data systems.

“The companies are placing their users at risk by collecting and retaining so much information,” said Marc Rotenberg, president and executive director of the Electronic Privacy Information Center, a nonprofit research and advocacy organization. “As long as this much personal data is collected and kept by these companies, they are always going to be the target of government collection efforts.”

For instance, Internet companies store email messages, search queries, payment details and other personal information to provide online services and show personalized ads.

They are trying to blunt the spying revelations’ effects on their businesses. Each disclosure risks alienating users, and foreign governments are considering laws that would discourage their citizens from using services from American Internet companies. The cloud computing industry could lose $180 billion, or a quarter of its revenue, by 2016, according to Forrester Research.

Telecom companies, which were not included in the proposal to Congress, have had a closer working relationship with the government than the Internet companies, such as longstanding partnerships to hand over customer information. While the Internet companies have published so-called transparency reports about government requests, for example, the telecoms have not.

“For the phone companies,” said Tim Wu, a professor at Columbia studying the Internet and the law, “help with federal spying is a longstanding tradition with roots in the Cold War. It’s another area where there’s a split between old tech and new tech — the latter taking a much more libertarian position.”

The new surveillance principles, the Internet companies said, should include limiting governments’ authority to collect users’ information, setting up a legal system of oversight and accountability for that authority, allowing the companies to publish the number and nature of the demands for data, ensuring that users’ online data can be stored in different countries and establishing a framework to govern data requests between countries.
In a statement, Larry Page, Google's co-founder and chief executive, criticized governments for the “apparent wholesale collection of data, in secret and without independent oversight.” He added, “It’s time for reform and we urge the U.S. government to lead the way.”

In their open letter, the companies maintain they are fighting for their customers’ privacy. “We are focused on keeping users’ data secure,” the letter said, “deploying the latest encryption technology to prevent unauthorized surveillance on our networks, and by pushing back on government requests to ensure that they are legal and reasonable in scope.”

The global principles outlined by the companies make no specific mention of any country and call on “the world’s governments to address the practices and laws regulating government surveillance of individuals and access to their information.” But the open letter to American officials specifically cites the United States Constitution as the guidepost for new restrictions on government surveillance.

Chief among the companies’ proposals is a demand to write “sensible limitations” on the ability of government agencies to compel Internet companies to disclose user data, forbidding the wholesale vacuuming of user information.

“Governments should limit surveillance to specific known users for lawful purposes, and should not undertake bulk data collection of Internet communications,” the companies said. (Contributor: By Edward Wyatt, Brian Chen and Claire Miller for The New York Times)

Prayer focus: More and more citizens are becoming wary and fearful of government intrusion into their privacy, and the main question, according polls, is, “Why?” For years it has been known that businesses, particularly retail outlets, have tracked customer purchases and preferences, and that the resultant data is sold and traded for advertising purposes. Now the “big names” in the tech field are showing concern, and they get a serious hearing because of their clout via political donations. The process is neither clean nor is it pretty, and no one seems to know why the National Security Agency (NSA) is collecting and storing so much data. Pray that resultant hearings will bring to light what is hidden and let the nation hear truth. The motives and purpose of those who read and store all this information will also be brought to the light.

“He has shown you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justly, To love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God?” (Micah 6:8)

“Also He said to them, ‘Is a lamp brought to be put under a basket or under a bed? Is it not to be set on a lampstand? For there is nothing hidden which will not be revealed, nor has anything been kept secret but that it should come to light. If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear.”’ (Mark 4:21-23)

**GOSPEL-STARVED NORTH KOREA AND THE BIBLE BOMBING STRATEGY**

The [Bibles are dropped by balloon into North Korea](#) and strategic locations through use of tracking devices.

Eric Foley who heads Seoul USA says they are making progress by using launches that require fewer people, launch more Bibles, and track the balloons better.

"We've recently been able to complete most of our balloon launch activity, other than one or two launches that we hope to still get in, but this year we'll close out having launched more than 45,000 Bibles," says Foley.
North Koreans are required to memorize 100 stories about Kim Il-sung, who led the country until his death and was worshipped as a god. Seoul USA presents the true God to them.

"This was not an idea that we created," says Foley, giving credit to the underground church in North Korea and Christian defectors from the Communist country.

"And so our role in it is really helping to put them, and to support them, but the vision really came from them," says the Seoul USA spokesman.

The Bible bombs are sent into the southern third of North Korea where the wealthiest and most loyal people to the Kim dynasty live. They are also the better educated and literate. Only time will tell the impact. (Contributor: Charlie Butts for One News Now)

Watch CBN Video: <Click Here>

Pray for the success of these efforts to deliver copies of the Bible into the most repressive and anti-Christian nation in the world. Let us give thanks for the success of the mission so far and pray for the receptivity of the people’s hearts to receive and absorb the Bible’s life-giving message. We may base our prayers in God’s promises concerning the strength and power intrinsic in His Word, as well as His promise that His Word will not return void (empty, devoid of purpose), but that it will fulfill God’s plan to reach into people’s hearts through His Word. May God keep this ministry going and watch over and protect His messengers.

“For the word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.” (Hebrews 4:12)

“For as the rain comes down, and the snow from heaven, and do not return there, but water the earth, and make it bring forth and bud, that it may give seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall My word be that goes forth from My mouth; It shall not return to Me void, but it shall accomplish what I please, and it shall prosper in the thing for which I sent it. (Isaiah 55:10-11)