

FIRE from HEAVEN

**The Rise of Pentecostal
Spirituality and the
Reshaping of Religion in
the Twenty-first Century**

HARVEY COX



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Pentecostalism in America: “Whose Report Do You Believe?”

*Run to the young man there and tell him
that Jerusalem will be without walls,
so numerous will be the people and cattle in it.
I myself shall be a wall of fire around it,
says the Lord, and a glorious presence within it.*

Zechariah 2:4-5

PENTECOSTALISM HAS encircled the world, but it was born in America. I knew very well that in order to write about it honestly, I would eventually have to come to terms with my mixed feelings about what was happening to it in the land of its birth. For five years I had tried to become familiar with as many different varieties of the American wing of the movement as possible. I visited tiny congregations in rented halls so poorly heated my teeth chattered until the singing warmed me up; and colossal congregations meeting in glistening air-conditioned ultra-modern temples where off-duty police directed the traffic into the parking lots. I sang and prayed with pentecostal people in the urban ghettos of Los Angeles, Chicago, New York, and Boston; and in remote mountain hamlets in West Virginia and Kentucky. Within the United States alone I attended services in

seven different languages. I worshipped with black, Latino, anglo, and Asian congregations and started to sense a special closeness and affection for pentecostal people. I even began to catch on to some of their inside jokes and esoteric references. I often found that I forgot my original status as an interested academic observer and began to feel completely at home in pentecostal churches.

But there was something that had not changed. Just as when I attended the "little church" with Lois nearly fifty years ago, I felt close to the people around me, but I still had plenty of mental reservations about many of the things the preachers said. Also I could not help noticing the deep divisions within the movement itself. I knew that arguments over theology, personality clashes, racial and ethnic tensions, regional differences, and denominational labels still prevented pentecostals from being the united people the promise of the first Pentecost held out. I also became aware that there are some very unattractive political and theological currents running through American pentecostalism today, features that most of my pentecostal friends hoped I would not notice, or—if I did—would not attach too much significance to when I wrote about their churches. I could understand their feelings. Pentecostals have endured more than their share of dismissive scholarship, condescending analysis, and popular disdain. They have been repudiated as semiliterate, spurned as psychologically deranged, or scorned as the hapless and pathetic victims of religious charlatans. They know what it feels like to be laughed at as "holy rollers," to bear the stigma of both religious and social banishment, and to be contemptuously ignored by the world of theological scholarship. I did not want to perpetuate any of these injuries on people I had come to love and respect.

As I came closer to the actual writing of this book, however, I realized that I could not ultimately avoid dealing with the unappealing side of pentecostalism, not just elements that I found unattractive, but the parts that are an embarrassment to the pentecostals themselves, at least to the ones I had come to know. Still, I did not savor the prospect. I had gotten so much of value from my association with pentecostals that I did not want to cause them

any grief. The last thing I wanted was to relapse into the role of a patronizing objective observer. Then, just as I was wondering how I was going to undertake this more cheerless part of my journey, an opportunity came to plunge into it in a way I had not expected. I was grateful to get the chance, but the result was unsettling, and even alarming at times. Still, it gave me a way to say what needed to be said and still maintain the bonds of trust that had developed between me and the people I was learning from.

I had flown to a small college in Kansas to give a commencement address in May of 1993. After I had assured the graduates that they were the future leaders of America, and they had driven off with their diplomas and their happy families, I relaxed at the college president's home with some of the faculty members. The conversation eventually came around to what I was currently working on. When I told them I was writing a book about pentecostalism, at first they seemed a little surprised; but then the president told me there was a spectacularly successful pentecostal church in a nearby city that I simply had to visit, if only to help them all understand its astonishing appeal and rapid expansion. A quick phone call determined that there was a service that very evening, so within an hour, I set out, accompanied by the college psychotherapist and a professor of philosophy, both of them impelled in part by curiosity and in part by a reluctance to have their guest get lost in a strange city. We were off to visit the Sheffield Family Life Center in Kansas City, Missouri.

Although its name makes it sound like a counseling clinic, the Family Life Center is actually a pentecostal congregation affiliated with the Assemblies of God, the largest predominantly white pentecostal denomination in America. Like many other pentecostal congregations recently, however, the building it meets in is called a "family life center," in part because it provides the space for many of the church's other programs in addition to worship, and also because—I was beginning to learn—many pentecostals have attached themselves so enthusiastically to the recent religious celebration of "traditional family values" that the words have even found their way into the names of their churches.

We lost our way briefly while looking for the address, stopped at a gas station, and were informed by a friendly attendant that we were close and that if we continued on this road we would see it, but "it doesn't look like a church, it looks like a warehouse." After a couple of more inquiries, we found it, and saw that it would indeed have been easy to miss. The church is located in what can charitably be called an "unpromising section" of Kansas City. It stands in the midst of unmowed vacant lots, rutted roads, freight yards, a couple of service stations, and some nondescript, apparently unused buildings. Here and there a partial car skeleton peeped out of encroaching weeds, giving the neighborhood a certain Appalachian ambience. It was obviously an area in which real estate values are not particularly high.

My companions glanced around skeptically at the desolate location. But as far as I was concerned the forlorn surroundings did nothing to diminish the church's promise. After all, the pentecostal revival began in a warehouse, and the less-than-upscale people the movement draws often live near districts like this. Also, given the need for a large building and the meager resources many pentecostal people command—to say nothing of the need for parking spaces—this venue seemed quite appropriate.

We had arrived about ten minutes before the 6:00 P.M. service was scheduled to begin, but already both the parking lot next to the church and the larger one across the street were filling up rapidly with Fords, Chevies, pickup trucks, and an occasional Honda or Volkswagen. We parked in the larger lot, and I noticed that one of my companions, the psychologist who had driven us here, not only locked all the doors, but circled the car to test that each one was secure.

Inside, the building seemed utterly cavernous. Rows of metal folding seats, about 600 of them by my estimate, faced a wide stage on which an immense off-white curtain was presently drawn. From behind it we could hear the chirps and roars of invisible clarinets and trombones tuning up. There was an air of expectation in the crowd. We sat down about halfway back and looked around. People nodded pleasantly, but—as in most pentecostal churches—no one handed us a bulletin or a hymn book, not

because they were not glad to see us but because the order of service is supposed to be spontaneous and the songs are flashed on a screen. I noticed that to our right there was a large balcony equipped with facilities for preparing and serving food. The railing of the balcony was decked with dozens of flags representing—as we learned later—the countries where the Assemblies of God has missionaries.

The auditorium was filling up rapidly but people were still arriving. Our earlier phone call, answered by a recorded voice, had informed us that there were 9 o'clock and 11 o'clock services in the morning as well as this one. I asked the smiling woman in the pew in front of me who welcomed us if she had been present that morning and she said she had. "And it was terrific," she added, "we really had *church*." From behind the curtain the tuning-up sounds, trumpet runs, and flute trills, were becoming more clamorous. The people seated around us did not appear well to do. Their clothes might have come from discount stores or rummage sales. Some of the young people sported bright message t-shirts. Many of the men wore no ties. The women seemed to favor print dresses and pants suits.

Most of the people were white, and—listening carefully to the accents I heard around me—I speculated that many had found their way to Kansas City from Appalachia and the Ozarks. But there was a scattering of blacks and Latinos, and a few Asians. Only slightly more than half those in attendance were women. Two seats to my right, with an empty chair intervening, sat a young black woman who appeared to be about eighteen years old. She was dressed poorly in a tattered knit sweater and a shapeless skirt. She wore sneakers and droopy yellow socks. I knew that poor people often save their best clothes, sometimes their only respectable apparel, for churchgoing. But when I saw her I was reminded that some people are so poor they don't even have Sunday-go-to-meeting clothes. She looked nervous, and was fingering a large black leather-covered Bible. Even though I knew what time the service was supposed to begin, I asked her anyway in an effort to start a conversation. She told me, but then quickly looked away. She was not interested in

socializing, at least not with an unfamiliar white man wearing a suit and tie.

But there was a lot of socializing going on. A tall white woman adorned with a towering black bouffant hairdo strolled from pew to pew welcoming people. A tall, lean man with thick glasses and a slight squint, who later turned out to be the pastor, was sidling along between the rows of chairs shaking hands, beaming, and clapping people on the shoulder. He was dressed as I had never seen any Baptist or Lutheran minister attired, in a cream sport jacket, flamboyant red and blue tie, crimson suspenders, dark-blue trousers, and white shoes. It occurred to me that he could easily have played one of the Broadway gamblers—say Harry the Horse—in “Guys and Dolls.”

The curtain was still closed when a very friendly middle-aged woman in purple slacks, green blouse, and yellow sweater leaned over from the row of seats behind us and laughed heartily as she shook our hands and welcomed us. The hue of her hair suggested a less-than-successful tinting. She spoke with a broad mid-western accent. It turned out she had accidentally bumped the philosopher's elbow while finding her seat and said she didn't want him to think she was trying to hug him. “That comes later on in the service,” she said, and laughed again. The philosopher, who had told me earlier he was a back-sliding Episcopalian, glanced at me apprehensively. I seized the opportunity, however, to ask her some questions. No, she had not been here this morning, she had had to work, cleaning an office building. But she had certainly been here last week, she said, “and we really *got down* here. I mean we really *had church*.”

It was the second time I had heard that expression in ten minutes. I had heard it previously among African Americans but not among whites, so I asked her what “really having church” meant. “You'll see,” she said smiling, “in just a minute.” She told me she had been coming to this church for three years, ever since she moved here from a small town in southern Missouri. When I asked her if most of the people in the church had recently moved to town she said, “No, everybody's coming here,” adding with what seemed a note of pride that this was a new building because

the congregation had overflowed the last one. As she was talking a man in olive-drab slacks and an open-necked flannel shirt joined her. He nodded to me, but our conversation was cut off as the lights dimmed and the curtain parted dramatically on a towering swell of music to reveal about fifty people on stage producing an eruption of joyous sounds.

Now all eyes were directed to the wide stage, bathed in spots and footlights. On the left sat five ministers, including the one in the crimson suspenders. In the middle a good-sized band perched on risers between two choirs, one on either side of a magnificent set of gleaming drums and cymbals. There were two lead singers. One was a very pretty, slim young white woman in her early twenties, wearing a semiclinging vivid red dress that reached just below her knees, with a stylish gold chain around her waist. She moved and swayed as she sang, and led a song called “Whose Report Do You Believe?” Her brown hair fell well below the shoulders and swirled as she turned back and forth, first pointing up to the ceiling on “whose,” then to the congregation on “you.”

Next to her, also leading the singing, stood a handsome black woman, a little older, adorned in a longer, somewhat more subdued but expensive-looking dark-patterned dress. Her hair was cut a bit shorter than her white companion's and carefully coiffed. Her gestures were lively, almost like those of her partner but perhaps a shade more muted, not quite as buoyant. There were other blacks on the stage too, in the choirs and in the band. The congregation was singing along vigorously and clapping. I glanced at the young black woman beside me. She was singing too, but still seemed a little reticent. I wondered what this splashy display of interracial haute couture meant to her.

I turned back to watch the band. Pentecostal churches almost always have them, but they are usually four- or five-piece affairs. This was the biggest one I had ever seen: flute, two trumpets, a trombone, three saxophones, a violin equipped with an amplifying device, a clarinet, keyboard, piano guitar, electric bass, and drums. A dark-skinned man dressed in a carefully tailored light-blue suit and a canary necktie seemed to be actually leading the singing. At least he was waving his arms while holding a cordless

mike now in one hand, now in the other. I later learned he was a Filipino. The racial and ethnic mix of both the congregation and leadership seemed very impressive to me; and yet I would not hear the word "multicultural" all night.

After five minutes the same song was still going on. "Whose report do *you* believe?" the lead singers asked, pointing to the congregation. The message was: we don't believe "the world's" report. We believe *God's* report, the report that he loves us and sustains us, and that he "has given us the victory." As one song bounced quickly to another, the words flashed onto two large screens placed on either side of the stage. I used to wonder why pentecostals use this device so often, rather than simply photocopying the lyrics. When I asked a minister he told me it keeps people "from sticking their noses in books." It is also true that the words tend to be repetitious, and many congregations seem to know them by heart anyway.

After perhaps fifteen or twenty minutes of singing, the house lights went down even more and the Filipino man sang a poignant solo. It was about feeling lonely in the city, seeing homeless people, and asking, Why am I Here? It was a little schmaltzy, accompanied by a full orchestra on a tape instead of by the stage band. But everyone seemed to be listening intently, and I could well imagine that for many of the newcomers to this city from rural areas and small towns, the ballad carried very personal and painful connotations.

After the solo, we sang another song, with the same glamorous lead singers and the arm waver in the canary tie back in action. Then, just as the song ended, I heard a staccato burst of glossolalia. I looked around but then saw that it was coming from the drummer and was amplified by the clip-on microphone on his jacket. He went on for only about twenty seconds in a high monotone. As soon as he had finished, the pastor said through his own microphone, "That was speaking in tongues. Just as we read about it in Acts 2." Then the service proceeded apace.

I was bothered. I had heard tongue speaking in pentecostal churches many times before, and had never been annoyed. It can show how close the worshippers feel to God, and can provide a

way of praying that goes beyond normal linguistic limitations. But there was something about this instance that disturbed me. It had not come from the heart of the congregation, but from behind the footlights. It had been followed so quickly by the pastor's smoothly packaged explanation. This was not glossolalia as protest or as prophecy. It was glossolalia as performance, and—at least to me—it sounded counterfeit.

Next the pastor came to the microphone and made announcements in an off-handed, jocular, manner. In the same humorous vein he referred to the morning service in which a visiting preacher had apparently made a sustained plea for money. Obviously the guest's prolonged importuning had caused some complaints to the host pastor. So now he was telling the congregation that Jesus had talked about money more than any other single subject.

His remark reminded me that I had, in fact, noticed a lot of talk about money in pentecostal sermons, and not just to raise funds. They seem to talk about it much more than in the more established churches where the mention of filthy lucre seems a little gauche, and is usually restricted to Pledge Sunday. I have often wondered why. After all, money is something that is on people's minds a lot. My guess is that pentecostals talk about it more because they usually don't have as much of it, therefore they do not feel so guilty about it and can talk about wanting it with fewer qualms. It is also possible that in a society where everyone is told that not having enough money is one's own fault, money becomes a source of anxiety and fantasy. The people who attend pentecostal churches tend to be from the same population that plays the lottery.

Money—why you don't have enough and how to get more—has come to play such a central role in many pentecostal churches that recently a whole new theology has grown up around it. It is premised on the belief that God not only wills eternal life for all believers, but robust health and material prosperity as well. They call it "the-health-and-wealth gospel," and one of its best-known practitioners, Kenneth Hagin, has explained it in a book aptly entitled *Redeemed from Poverty, Sickness and Death*. The idea is that through the crucifixion of Christ, Christians have inherited all

the promises God made to Abraham, and these include both spiritual and material well-being. The only problem is that Christians have too little faith to appropriate what is rightly theirs. What they need to do is to state that claim loud and clear. This so-called name-it-and-claim-it, or positive confession theology has become very popular—and very controversial—in pentecostal circles recently. In 1990 an Assemblies of God professor at the denomination's Southeastern College in Lakeland, Florida, published a scalding condemnation of it as a serious deviation from the Christian Gospel, derived from such cultic sources as New Thought, which was a nineteenth-century mind-healing movement. He also correctly added that it owed much to the "positive thinking" philosophy of the late Norman Vincent Peale and to the upbeat religious boosterism that televangelist Robert Schuller purveys from his Crystal Cathedral. Still, few pentecostals will deny that despite such condemnations, the gospel of health and wealth has many adherents among their people and their ministers.

I did not hear any name-it-and-claim-it theology at Sheffield Family Life Center that night. But was it somehow implicit in the spectacle, the spotlights, and the theatrical production values? Aimee Semple McPherson's colorful "illustrated sermons" had introduced this theatrical style into pentecostalism: but they had been straightforward parables, often presented with a redeeming element of self-parody. Here, however, the genre had been carried to excess. The glitz and glamour had defaced the Gospel. What message was the poor young black woman beside me actually getting from all of this? Whose report *should* she believe? The message of the Gospels (which were not read and hardly even alluded to that night), or the "report" that was conveyed with such luster by the beautiful people behind the footlights who seemed so happy, so chic, and so at ease in their elegant attire, and yet so much closer than the people she saw on television. When, later in the service, she went forward to accept the Lord, what did she think she was accepting? If it is true that in most religion, and in pentecostalism in particular, the medium is the message, exactly what *was* the message of this throbbing display of youthful energy and opulent beauty, especially to an auditorium

filled with people who clean office buildings and shop at yard sales?

As soon as the minister's peroration on money was over, something else happened that only deepened my already uneasy mood. He started talking excitedly about how *big* the Assemblies of God denomination was and how fast it was growing. Why, the Lord was adding *thousands* and *thousands* of souls every day. "Just look at the flags from all over the world. It's the biggest thing going!" I glanced at the people around me. They were looking at the flags, but they did not seem all that impressed. My hunch is that they had much more immediate problems, and that whether or not the church they were attending tonight was part of a worldwide religious bandwagon was not of pressing interest to them. I had heard a lot of boasting from pentecostals about their staggering growth statistics and it was beginning to irritate me: it sounded like more health-and-wealth theology. They seemed to be saying, in effect, "God must be on our side." But this is a somewhat ironic claim to be made by a movement that early in its life maintained that the proof that God was with them was that they were so small and so despised.

I could feel my attitude souring by the minute. But I caught myself, decided not to make premature judgments, and tried to listen as sympathetically as I could. We sang another song. Then something surprising happened. The pastor came back to the microphone and, while the band played softly and the choirs hummed, he issued what both pentecostals and evangelicals call "the invitation" or "altar call." It is a plea for anyone present who is unsaved to come forward, accept Christ, and be redeemed. I was familiar with the practice, of course, but I was surprised because I had never seen it come so early in a service. It is usually reserved for the grand finale, after the singing and preaching have induced a receptive mood. Later on I was to learn why it came at this point on that night. The guest preacher was still present. He was going to preach again tonight. And he still wanted money to support his hospital in Calcutta. Consequently, the peak moment of this service was not going to be an entreaty to accept Jesus but an appeal for cash.

The preacher dragged the altar call out for several minutes. While he was pleading I noticed the young black woman was becoming agitated. Finally she left her seat and went forward to accept the Lord, leaving her Bible on the seat. A couple of other people also made their way to the front of the auditorium—there was no altar of any kind there—and counselors led them all off to a side room. I noticed that, as the pastor had said while he was repeating the invitation, men counselors accompanied the men and women counselors the women. The heated excitement of their worship has made pentecostals especially sensitive to accusations of sexual impropriety, and the widely publicized indiscretions of such televangelists as Jimmy Swaggart and Jim Bakker have made them even touchier.

Finally the minister introduced the visiting preacher. This was not a typical night at the church that I had hoped for, and I was disappointed that we would not hear the regular preacher in the crimson suspenders speak, since I had been told of his reputation as a riveting orator. But once more I stilled my disappointment and sat back to listen to the guest as the house lights dimmed again. The visiting missionary started by talking about his family, and how he had consulted with them before making this trip back to America. They had all prayed about it together, he said, and they had finally granted him permission to fly from Calcutta for this week of missionary emphasis. He asked the ushers to hand out little calling cards with a color photo of himself with his smiling wife and two small children. Like many pentecostal preachers he was an accomplished raconteur. He warmed his listeners up with some piquant stories and jokes, then effected a careful transition into an attack on possessiveness in family affairs and in life in general. Then he lampooned the self-righteous folks who think they'll be the only ones in heaven. To do so he told the oft-repeated story about the people who had to be walled off in the celestial city because they thought they were the only ones there. I thought as I listened that however hackneyed this old gag was, it was not a story a fundamentalist would ever tell. Fundamentalists believe that they *will* be the only ones saved, while most pentecostals do not. Pentecostals do insist they have

something other believers lack, but they usually concede they are not the only passengers on the ship of salvation.

I still felt grumpy, but as the preacher got going I also discovered that somehow I *wanted* him to do well. I wondered why. Of course, I had put myself on the spot by persuading the philosopher and the psychotherapist to give up an evening to come with me, and at this point I was not so sure they were glad they had come. But there was something else. I became aware that throughout my travels around the realms of pentecostalism I had been keeping a kind of mental ledger, entering positive and negative points about what I observed. And I knew that for some reason I wanted the positive side to prevail at the end. So I found I was trying to help this preacher, chuckling at the jokes even when I had heard them many times before, nodding at the sentimental stories.

After ten minutes of banter the preacher announced his text. My hopes rose again. It was from the book of the Old Testament prophet Zechariah. The text, quoted in the epigraph to this chapter, foresees the reestablishment of a renewed and glorious Jerusalem. It says that "Jerusalem will be without walls," that people and cattle will be "numerous," and God promises, "I myself shall be a wall of fire around it . . . and a glorious presence within it." I was pleased because this is a perfect text for a pentecostal sermon: it predicts the New Jerusalem. It describes the lushness and abundance of the coming millennium. It promises the immediate presence of God with his people. And it has *fire* in it, this time the Lord Himself *is* the wall of fire that protects the inhabitants from danger. I was prepared to witness a spirited presentation, if not reenactment of this explosive text.

But he let me down. After making a compelling start at what could have been a strong, engaging, almost completely narrative sermon, he skidded like a truck on the ice into a totally different style. He started in on what in his mental file must be labeled "the missionary sermon." Now his manner changed abruptly. A well-rehearsed catch came into his voice at the end of nearly every phrase, as though he could hardly fight back the sobs: "Her little legs were so thin [sob] that they were no thicker than my

[sob] finger." Then he recounted a personal story he must have repeated a hundred times before. It told of how his parents had seen a vision that instructed them to pray for him while he lay sick in a rude hut on a distant island in the Indian ocean. They had called people together in New Jersey, prayed, then telegraphed him. He was cured, got to his feet, and preached at a revival in which many souls were saved. He had had other visions, lots of them, and he had also been blessed time and time again by the miraculous appearances of complete strangers who mysteriously handed him money just when he needed it.

Now I was getting downright edgy. Of course I had heard about signs and wonders and miracles and visions before in pentecostal churches, but this preacher claimed to be an ambulatory lightning rod for supernatural interventions. As I looked around me I noticed that some of the regular worshippers appeared edgy too. They seemed to *want* to believe this courageous emissary from a city so far away, but did they feel some of the creeping incredulity I did? When does testimony turn into bragging? At what point does reliance on God's grace curdle into an infantile dependency on just plain magic? When do insight and discernment slip over into clairvoyance and telepathy? I knew that we were now traversing one of the perilous edges of pentecostal spirituality, the indistinct border it shares with crystal reading, channeling, and other New Age nostrums.

My mind began to wander. As I watched the preacher pace the stage and heard his breath reverberate through the microphone, I was carried back to a visit I had made five years earlier to another pentecostal family life center, the one located on the 279-acre headquarters estate of Jimmy Swaggart Ministries in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. What was it that had called forth the mental association? Maybe it was the flags. That was the last time I had seen so many of them in a church setting. Only there they represented not the mission fields of a denomination, but the 195 nations reached by Swaggart's own sprawling world ministry. I remembered that I had been shown a state-of-the-art television production center, a private Christian elementary school, and an impressive printing plant. Swaggart's Family Worship Center itself

is a modern eight-sided building whose lobbies are decorated with gigantic world maps showing where his television evangelism is carried. At that time the statistics were spectacular, even for a pentecostal televangelist. At the height of his fame, before his widely publicized "fall," it is estimated that Swaggart was reaching 500 million people, the largest television audience ever to watch a regularly scheduled program of any kind. His preaching was carried on more than 3,000 stations not counting cable. Contributions poured into his office, which had its own ZIP code and handled more mail than any other single address in the state. It is estimated that in 1986 the money flowed in at the rate of about half a million dollars a day. It was an impressive set-up.

But, sitting in the Sheffield Family Life Center in 1993, I also remembered being disappointed by Swaggart himself. I don't know what I was expecting. Like many people I had seen him frequently on television—weeping, scolding, dancing, singing along with his choir, sometimes picking out tunes on the piano. Also like many others who did not like his theology I found him a little frightening, but strangely compelling, a voice from some hidden dimension of myself perhaps. I had often puzzled over just what it was that kept me from switching him off right away when I happened upon his familiar face while grazing the channels. I continued to be puzzled until I read Lawrence Wright's candid description, in his book *Saints and Sinners*, of why he felt the same fascination. "I felt an unhappy kinship with this man," he writes, "I could sense the raw and sometimes dangerous expansiveness of the human spirit. His was not a religion I could believe in—but then mere belief was not what he was after: it was surrender, total abject surrender of the spirit. And of course a part of me longed for exactly that, the ecstatic abandonment of my own busy, judgmental, ironic mentality."

That was it. On television at least, Swaggart was something of a shaman. By putting himself into an ecstatic state of consciousness, with hundreds of millions of people watching, he conveyed a wildly dissonant note from a register that is somewhere within us, but that we do not hear from very often. As Wright puts it, he was beguiled by Swaggart in part because of fear, a fear that the

man was on to something, "that the whole point of life was to plunge into the wilderness and joyfully throw aside the resistance and anxiety that characterize the skeptic." He confesses that when he watched a Swaggart program he was both drawn to and terrified of the possibility of becoming himself a person "bursting with spiritual power."

I had also sensed some of that power on television. But at Swaggart's church it was diluted. He seemed almost puny. It was clearly one of those instances in which the power of the television medium transforms and magnifies the ordinary. Kathleen Reid, a professor of Communications at Lee College, a pentecostal institution in Cleveland, Tennessee, has suggested that Swaggart—and the kind of primitive pentecostalism he represents—is extraordinarily well suited to television. Television is a modern technology that has a curious similarity to the magic of shamanism. The shrinking of distance, the larger-than-life presence, the compression of time, the sense of belonging suggested by the congregation's response, the appeal to emotion rather than logic—all integral to the topography of television—are also elements of shamanism. The problem is that when the shaman is pacing a stage 200 feet away, when the contortions of his face and the glint in his eyes—so visible on the screen—cannot be seen, then something of the magic evaporates.

I have not seen Jimmy Swaggart on television for a long time now. After his tearful confession of his various rendezvous with prostitutes, and his defrocking by the Assemblies of God, many stations stopped carrying his program. He is also—along with Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker—a severe embarrassment to many pentecostals who wish they could have been spared the shoddy saga of the rise and fall of such celebrities. But Swaggart remains an important figure for anyone who seeks to understand the appeal of the pentecostal impulse. For me he represented not only the unprocessed harshness of primal spirituality, but also how easily it can be manipulated and misused in the hands of a skilled practitioner.

I think that Wright is correct that Swaggart was in touch with something fearsome but real in all of us. But Swaggart was also

an unprincipled megalomaniac, a cruel and mean-tempered man whose rambling sermons attacked "faggots" and Catholics and the leadership of his own denomination with equal ferocity. I do not believe, however, that in saying no to Swaggart's version of pentecostal Christianity, as many pentecostals do, one can deny the reality of the spiritual forces he was able to conjure. Denying them does not make them go away. Nor does exploiting them for sordid purposes mean that they cannot also inspire generosity and compassion. I think that Swaggart is a warning signal to the tired mainline churches, pointing to genuine spiritual energies most of them have forgotten. But to pentecostals he is *also* a warning signal, a reminder that the fire from heaven can burn and destroy as well as purify and inspire. Both the unprecedented fame and the unparalleled nosedive of Jimmy Swaggart remind us that reemergence of rudimentary spirituality at the end of the twentieth century can be both good news and bad news.

When I snapped out of my reverie about Jimmy Swaggart and glanced at my watch I was startled to find that although my mind had been wandering for nearly ten minutes, the preacher was still going on unabated. Now I just wanted to leave, and I hoped he would wind it up or at least move on to something else soon. He did move on: he started to rage about the U.S. government, which he declared was at this very moment being taken over by a satanic conspiracy. Now my disquietude turned to revulsion. I had heard that some pentecostals have become ardent believers in satanic plot theories, and that some were even devotees of accounts of the alleged recovery of memories of satanic ritual abuse. I glanced toward the doors and wondered how obvious it would be if my companions and I left. Would this make us part of the conspiracy?

I was relieved when the service finally ended, though only after twenty-five more grueling minutes of the visiting preacher's sobs, stagey sniffles, and pleas for money. Other worshippers seemed relieved too. After the benediction, people pushed toward the doors quickly and there was not much socializing. The woman in the purple slacks with the tinted hair who had greeted me so merrily before barely glanced at me as we sidled out between the

rows of chairs. I thought maybe she was sorry I had picked this night to come to a church she obviously loved, because now I might go away with a bad impression. I wanted to assure her that I understood, that not even the worst excesses of a guest preacher's histrionics could dampen my affection for pentecostal people and for their way of worshipping God. I knew that as far as she was concerned, tonight we had *not* "had church," but I also knew there would be other nights when we would. Moving toward the doors, I even felt a little protective toward the people around me. Uprooted, neglected, the also-rans in the fierce American battle for success and security, it was they and not the melodramatic evangelist who brought the real pain and the longing—the sense of the reality of God—to pentecostal worship. Suddenly, as we returned to the car I realized that despite my anger and discomfort, the Spirit had been telling me something that evening after all. I was going to have to write about the disagreeable underside of pentecostalism not because I disliked the woman with the tinted hair but because I liked her very much. She deserved something better than she had gotten that evening, and if what I wrote could tilt the current battle within pentecostalism even a little in her direction, it would be worth the effort.