Soldiers of Christ I

Inside America's most powerful megachurch

Harpers Magazine, May 2005
By Jeff Sharlet

They are drawn as if by magnetic forces; they speak of Colorado Springs, home to the greatest concentration of fundamentalist Christian activist groups in American history, both as a last stand and as a kind of utopia in the making. They say it is new and unique and precious, embattled by enemies, and also that it is "traditional," a blueprint for what everybody wants, and envied by enemies. The city itself is unspectacular, a grid of wide western avenues lined with squat, gray and beige box buildings, only a handful of them taller than a dozen stories. Local cynics point out that if you put Colorado Springs on a truck and carted it to Nebraska, it would make Omaha look lovely. But the architecture is not what draws Christians looking for clean living. The mountains help, but there are other mountain towns. What Colorado Springs offers, ultimately, is a story.

Lori Rose is from Minnesota and heard rumors about this holy city when she lived on an Air Force base near Washington, D.C. Her husband isn't a Christian, refuses Jesus, looks at things he shouldn't; but she has found a church to attend without him and joined a marriage study group there. Ron Poelstra came from Los Angeles. Now he volunteers at his church, selling his pastor's books on "free-market theology" after services. His two teenage boys stand behind him, display models for the benefits of faith. L.A., Ron says, would have eaten them up: the gangs. Adam Taylor, now a pastor, grew up in Westchester County, an heir to the Bergdorf Goodman fortune, the son of artists and writers. In Colorado Springs he learned the Bible the hard way, each word a nail pounded into sin.

The story they found in Colorado is about newness: new houses, new roads, new stores. And about oldness, imagined: what is thought to be the traditional way of life, families as they were before the culture wars, after the World Wars, which is to say, during the brief, Cold War moment when America was a nation of single-breadwinner nuclear families.

Crime, of course, looms over this story. Not the actual facts of it—the burglary rate in and around Colorado Springs exceeds that in New York City and Los Angeles—but the idea of crime: a faith in the absence of it. And of politics, too: Colorado Springs' evangelicals believe they live without it, in a carved-out space for civility and for like-minded dedication to common-sense principles. Even pollution plays a part: Christian conservatives there believe that they breathe cleaner air, live on ground untainted by the satanic fires of nineteenth-century industry—despite the smog that collects against the foothills of the Rockies and the cyanide, from a century of mining, that is leaching into the aquifers and mountain streams.

But those are facts, and Colorado Springs is a city of faith. A shining city at the foot of a hill. No one there believes it is perfect. And no one is so self-centered as to claim the perfection of Colorado Springs as his or her ambition. The shared vision is more modest, and more grandiose. It is a city of people who have fled the cities, people who have fought a spiritual war for the ground they are on, for an interior frontier on which they have built new temples to the Lord. From these temples they will retake their forsaken promised lands, remake them in the likeness of a dream. They call the dream "Christian," but in its particulars it is "American." Not literally but as in a story, one populated by cowboys and Indians, monsters and prayer warriors to slay them, and ladies to reward the warriors with chaste kisses. Colorado Springs is a city of moral fabulousness. It is a city of fables.

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The city's mightiest megachurch crests silver and blue atop a gentle slope of pale yellow prairie grass on the outskirts of town. Silver and blue, as it happens, are Air Force colors. New Life Church was built far north of town in part so it would be visible from the Air Force Academy. New Life wanted that kind of character in its congregation.

"Church" is insufficient to describe the complex. There is a permanent structure called the Tent, which regularly fills with hundreds or thousands of teens and twentysomethings for New Life's various youth gatherings. Next to the Tent stands the old sanctuary, a gray box capable of seating 1,500; this juts out into the new sanctuary, capacity 7,500, already too small. At the complex's western edge is the World Prayer Center, which looks like a great iron wedge driven into the plains. The true architectural wonder of New Life, however, is the pyramid of authority into which it orders its 11,000 members. At the base are 1,300 cell groups, whose leaders answer to section leaders, who answer to zone, who answer to district, who answer to Pastor Ted Haggard, New Life's founder.

Pastor Ted, who talks to President George W. Bush or his advisers every Monday, is a handsome forty-eight-year-old Indianan, most comfortable in denim. He likes to say that his only disagreement with the President is automotive; Bush drives a Ford pickup, whereas Pastor Ted loves his Chevy. In addition to New Life, Pastor Ted presides over the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE), whose 45,000 churches and 30 million believers make up the nation's most powerful religious lobbying group, and also over a smaller network of his own creation, the Association of Life-Giving Churches, 300 or so congregations modeled on New Life's "free market" approach to the divine.

Pastor Ted will serve as NAE president for as long as the movement is pleased with him, and as long as Pastor Ted is its president the NAE will make its headquarters in Colorado Springs. Some believers call the city the Wheaton of the West, in honor of Wheaton, Illinois, once the headquarters of a more genteel Christian conservatism; others call Colorado Springs the "evangelical Vatican," a phrase that says much both about the city and about the easeful orthodoxy with which the movement now views itself. Certainly the gathering there has no parallel in history, not in Lynchburg, Virginia, nor Tulsa, nor Pasadena, nor Orlando, nor any other city that has aspired to be the capital of evangelical America. Evangelical activist groups ("parachurch" ministries, in the parlance) in Colorado Springs number in the hundreds, though a precise count is hard to specify. Groups migrate there and multiply. They produce missionary guides, "family resources," school curricula, financial advice, athletic training programs, Bibles for every occasion. The city is home to Young Life, to the Navigators, to Compassion International; to Every Home for Christ and Global Ethnic Missions (Youth Ablaze). Most prominent among the ministries is Dr. James Dobson's Focus on the Family, whose radio programs (the most extensive in the world, religious or secular), magazines, videos, and books reach more than 200 million people worldwide.

The press tends to regard Dobson as the most powerful evangelical Christian in America, but Pastor Ted is at least his equal. Whereas Dobson plays the part of national scold, promising to destroy politicians who defy the Bible, Pastor Ted quietly guides those politicians through the ritual of acquiescence required to save face. He doesn't strut, like Dobson; he gushes. When Bush invited him to the Oval Office to discuss policy with seven other chieftains of the Christian right in late 2003, Pastor Ted regaled his whole congregation with the story via email. "Well, on Monday I was in the World Prayer Center"—New Life's high-tech, twenty-four-hour-a-day prayer chapel —"and my cell phone rang." It was a presidential aide; "the President," says Pastor Ted, wanted him on hand for the signing of the Partial-Birth Abortion Ban Act. Pastor Ted was on a plane the next morning and in the President's office the following afternoon. "It was incredible," wrote Pastor Ted. He left it to the press to note that Dobson wasn't there.

No pastor in America holds more sway over the political direction of evangelicalism than does Pastor Ted, and no church more than

New Life. It is by no means the largest megachurch, nor is Ted the best-known man of God: Saddleback Church, in southern California, counts 80,000 on its rolls, and its pastor, Rick Warren, has sold 20 million copies of his book *The Purpose-Driven Life*. But Warren's success has come at the price of passion; his doctrine, though conservative, is bland and his politics too obscured by his self-help message to be potent. Although other churches boast more eminent memberships than Pastor Ted's—near D.C., for example, McLean Bible Church and The Falls Church (an Episcopal church that is, like many "mainline" churches today, now evangelical in all but name) minister to the powerful—such churches are not, like New Life, crucibles for the ideas that inspire the movement, ideas that are forged in the middle of the country and make their way to Washington only over time. Evangelicalism is as much an intellectual as an emotional movement; and what Pastor Ted has built in Colorado Springs is not just a battalion of spiritual warriors but a factory for ideas to arm them.

New Life began with a prophecy. In November 1984 a missionary friend of Pastor Ted's, respected for his gifts of discernment, made him pull over on a bend of Highway 83 as they were driving, somewhat aimlessly, in the open spaces north of the city. Pastor Ted—then twenty-eight, given to fasting and oddly pragmatic visions (he believes he foresaw Internet prayer networks before the Internet existed)—had been wondering why God had called him from near Baton Rouge, where he had been associate pastor of a megachurch, to this bleak city, then known as a "pastor's graveyard." The missionary got out of the car and squinted. He crouched down as if sniffing the ground. "This," said the missionary, "this will be your church. Build here."

So Pastor Ted did. First, he started a church in his basement. The pulpit was three five-gallon buckets stacked one atop the other, and the pews were lawn chairs. A man who lived in a trailer came round if he remembered it was Sunday and played guitar. Another man got the Spirit and filled a five-gallon garden sprayer with cooking oil and began anointing nearby intersections, then streets and buildings all over town. Pastor Ted told his flock to focus their prayers on houses with FOR SALE signs so that more Christians would come and join him. Once Pastor Ted and another missionary accidentally set off an alarm and hid together in a field while the police investigated. It was for a good cause, Pastor Ted would say; they were praying for the building to be taken off the market so it could someday be purchased for a future ministry. (It was.)

He was always on the lookout for spies. At the time, Colorado Springs was a small city split between the Air Force and the New Age, and the latter, Pastor Ted believed, worked for the devil. Pastor Ted soon began upsetting the devil's plans. He staked out gay bars, inviting men to come to his church; his whole congregation pitched itself into invisible battles with demonic forces, sometimes in front of public buildings. One day, while he was working in his garage, a woman who said she'd been sent by a witches' coven tried to stab Pastor Ted with a five-inch knife she pulled from a leg sheath; Pastor Ted wrestled the blade out of her hand. He let that story get around. He called the evil forces that dominated Colorado Springs—and every other metropolitan area in the country—"Control."

Sometimes, he says, Control would call him late on Saturday night, threatening to kill him. "Any more impertinence out of you, Ted Haggard," he claims Control once told him, "and there will be unrelenting pandemonium in this city." No kidding! Pastor Ted hadn't come to Colorado Springs for his health; he had come to wage "spiritual war."

He moved the church to a strip mall. There was a bar, a liquor store, New Life Church, a massage parlor. His congregation spilled out and blocked the other businesses. He set up chairs in the alley. He strung up a banner: SIEGE THIS CITY FOR ME, signed JESUS. He assigned everyone in the church names from the phone book they were to pray for. He sent teams to pray in front of the homes of supposed witches—in one month, ten out of fifteen of his targets put their houses on the market. His congregation "prayer-walked" nearly every street of the city.

Population boomed, crime dipped; Pastor Ted believes to this day that New Life helped chase the bad out of town. He thinks like that, a piston: less bad means more good. Church is good, and his church grew, so fast there were times when no one knew how many members to claim. So they stopped talking about "members." There was just New Life. "Are you New Life?" a person might ask. New Life moved into some corporate office space. Soon they bought the land that had been prophesied, thirty-five acres, and began to build what Pastor Ted promised would be a new Jerusalem.

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JERUSALEM, 2005—To the east is sky, empty land, Kansas. To the west, Pike's Peak, 14,110 feet above sea level. The old city core of Colorado Springs withers into irrelevance thirteen miles south; New Life leads the charge north, toward fusion with Denver and Boulder and a future of one giant front-range suburb, a muddy wave of big-box stores and beige tract houses eddying along roads so new they had yet to be added to the gas-station map I bought. Some Sundays traffic backs up from the church half a mile in all four directions. The congregation creeps up the highways. When parents finally pull into a space amidst the thousands of cars packed into a gray ocean of lot, their kids tumble out and dash toward the five silver pillars of the entrance to New Life, eager to slide across the expanse of tiled floor, to run circles around "The Defender," a massive bronze of a glowering angel, its muscular wings in full flex, arms at the zenith of what will undoubtedly be a smiting blow of his broad sword; to run laps around the new sanctuary, built in the round; and to bound up the stairs to "Fort Victory," whose rooms are designed to look like an Old West cavalry outpost, the kind they used to fight real live Indians, back when Colorado still had Indians to conquer and convert.

There were no kids in Fort Victory on my first Sunday at New Life, the first Sunday in 2005, it being a special day: "Dedication," the spiritual anointing of the church's new sanctuary. Metallic and modern, laced with steel girders and catwalks, the sanctuary is built like two great satellite dishes clapped belly to belly. It was designed, I was told, to "beam" prayer across the land. (New Lifers always turn to metaphors to describe their church and their city, between which they make little distinction. It is like a "training camp" in that its young men and women go forth on "missions." It is like a "bomb" in that it "explodes," "gifting" the rest of us with its fallout: revival, which is to say, "values," which is to say, "the Word," which is to say, as so many there do, "a better way of life.")

At the heart of the sanctuary rises a four-sided stage, and above the stage a great assemblage of machinery hovers, wrapped in six massive video screens. A woman near me compared it to Ezekiel's vision of a metallic angel, circular and "full of eyes all around." When the lights went down and the screens buzzed to life, the sanctuary turned a soft, silvery blue. Then the six screens filled with faces of tribute, paying homage to New Life and Pastor Ted: a senator, a congressman, Colorado's lieutenant governor, the city's mayor, and Tony Perkins, Dobson's enforcer on Capitol Hill; denominational chieftains, such as Thomas E. Trask, "general superintendent" of the 51 million worldwide members of the Assemblies of God; and a succession of minor nobles from the nation's megachurches. These I know now by numbers: Church of the Highlands, in Alabama, pastored by a New Life alumnus from 34 to 2,500 souls in the last four years; a New Life look-alike in Biddeford, Maine, that has multiplied to 5,000; Rocky Mountain Calvary, the New Life neighbor that has swelled in a decade from a handful to 6,000.

Kyle Fisk, executive administrator of the National Association of Evangelicals, had guided me to a seat in the front row, which meant I had to crane my neck back ninety degrees to follow the video screen above me. The worship band, dressed in black, goateed or soul-patched or shag-headed, lay flat on their backs, staring straight up. To my right sat a middle-aged woman in a floor-length flower-print dress with shades of orange and brown. Her hair was thick, chestnut, wavy, her face big-boned in a raw, middle-aged party-girl way. She tilted her head back to watch the tributes roll past. Her mouth hung open.

The band stood. A skinny, chinless man with a big, tenor voice, Ross Parsley, directed the musicians and the crowd, leading us and them and the choir as the guitarists kicked on the fuzz and the drummer pounded the music toward arena-rock frenzy. Two fog machines on each side of the stage filled the sanctuary with white clouds. Pod-shaped projectors cast a light show across the ceiling, giant spinning white snowflakes and cartwheeling yellow flowers and a shimmering blue water-effect. "Prepare the way!" shouted Worship Pastor Ross. "Prepare the way! The King is coming!" Across the stage teens began leaping straight up, a dance that swept across the arena: kids hopped, old men hopped, middle-aged women hopped. Spinners wheeled out from the ranks and danced like dervishes around the stage. The light pods dilated and blasted the sanctuary with red. Worship Pastor Ross roared: "*Let the King of Glory enter in!*" Ushers rushed through the crowds throwing out rainbow glow strings.

Watching the screens, we moved in slow motion through prairie grass. A voiceover announced, "The heart of God, beating in our hearts." Then the music and video quickened as the camera rose to meet the new sanctuary. Images spliced and jumped over one another: thousands of New Lifers holding candles, and dozens skydiving, and Pastor Ted, Bible in hand, blond head thrust forward above the Good Book, smiling, finger-shaking, singing, more smiling. (His nose is snubby and his brow overhung, lending him an impishness crucial to the smile's success; without that edge he would look not happy but stoned.) Now Pastor Ted, wearing a puffy ski jacket in red, white, and blue, took us to the suburban ranch house where he stayed on his fateful visit to Colorado Springs; then on to another suburban ranch house, nearly indistinguishable, where Pastor Ted made plans for the church. Then to a long succession of one-story corporate office spaces and strip-mall storefronts, the "sanctuaries" Pastor Ted rented as his congregation grew, each identical to the last but for the greater floor space.

The lights came up. Pastor Ted, now before us in the flesh, introduced a guest speaker, one of his mentors, Jack Hayford, founding pastor of the 10,000-strong Church On The Way, in Van Nuys, California. Hayford is a legend among evangelicals, one of the men responsible for the revival that made "Bible-believing" churches—what the rest of the world refers to as "fundamentalist"—safe for suburbia. He is a white-haired, balding, eagle-beaked man, a preacher of the old school, which is to say that he delivers his sermons with an actual Bible in hand (Pastor Ted uses a PalmPilot). Pastor Hayford wants to "wedge" an idea in our minds. The idea is "Order." The illustration is the Book of Revelation's description of four creatures surrounding Christ's throne. "The first . . . was like a lion, the second was like an ox, the third had a face like a man, the fourth was like a flying angel." Look! said Pastor Hayford, his voice sonorous and dignified. "All wonderful, all angels." The angels were merely different from one another. Just, he said, as we have different "ethnicities." And just as we have, in politics, a "hierarchy." And just as we have, in business, "different responsibilities," employer and employees. Angels, ethnicities, hierarchy, employers and employees—each category must follow a natural order.

Next came Pastor Larry Stockstill, presenting yet another variation of preacher. He took the stage with his wife, Melanie, who wore a pink pantsuit. Pastor Larry wore a brown pinstripe suit over a striped brown shirt and a golden tie. His voice was Louisiana, with "pulpit" pronounced "pull-peet."

"There's a world," he preached, pacing across the stage. "I call it the Underworld." The Underworld, he explained, is similar to what he sees when he goes skin diving; only instead of strange fishes, there's strange people. Too many churches, he said, focus on the Overworld. "That's where the nice people are. The successful people. But the Lord said, 'I'm not sending you to the Overworld, I'm sending you to the *Underworld*.' Where the creatures are. The critters! The people who are out of it. People you see in Colorado Springs, even. You got an underworld of people. The tattoo crowd, the people into drugs, the people into sex. You find 'em . . . in the Underworld."[1]

One last item on the agenda: Pastor Ted got a new Bible. A very big Bible: it took two sturdy men to lift it onto the stage. The members of New Life—as well as evangelical celebrities, such as Dr. Dobson and Oral Roberts—had secretly handwritten the entire Good Book. Later, Pastor Ted will show me this marvel in his office. "Neat, huh?" he'll say.

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After church, I walked across the parking lot to the World Prayer Center, where I watched prayers scroll over two giant flat-screen televisions while a young man played piano. The Prayer Center—a joint effort of several fundamentalist organizations but located at and presided over by New Life—houses a bookstore that when I visited was called the Arsenal (its name has since been changed to Solomon's Porch), as well as "corporate" prayer rooms, personal "prayer closets," hotel rooms, and the headquarters of Global Harvest, a ministry dedicated to "spiritual warfare." (The Prayer Center's nickname in the fundamentalist world is "spiritual NORAD.") The atrium is a soaring foyer adorned with the flags of the nations and guarded by another bronze warrior angel, a scowling, bearded type with massive biceps and, again, a sword. The angel's pedestal stands at the center of a great, eight-pointed compass laid out in muted red, white, and blue-black stone. Each point directs the eye to a contemporary painting, most depicting gorgeous, muscular men—one is a blacksmith, another is bound, fetish-style, in chains—in various states of undress. My favorite is *The Vessel*, by Thomas Blackshear, a major figure in the evangelical-art world.[2] Here in the World Prayer Center is a print of *The Vessel*, a tall, vertical panel of two nude, ample-breasted, white female angels team-pouring an urn of honey onto the shaved head of a naked, olive-skinned man below. The honey drips down over his slab-like pecs and his six-pack abs into the eponymous vessel, which he holds in front of his crotch. But the vessel can't handle that much honey, so the sweetness oozes over the edges and spills down yet another level, presumably onto our heads, drenching us in golden, godly love. Part of what makes Blackshear's work so compelling is precisely its unabashed eroticism; it aims to turn you on, and then to turn that passion toward Jesus.

In the chapel are several computer terminals, where one can sign on to the World Prayer Team and enter a prayer. Eventually one's words will scroll across the large flat screens, as well as across the screens around the world, which as many as 70,000 other Prayer Team members are watching at any point in time. Prayers range from the mundane (real-estate deals and job situations demand frequent attention) to the urgent, such as this prayer request from "Rachel" of Colorado: *Danielle. 15 months old. Temperature just shy of 105 degrees. Lethargic. Won't eat.*

Or this one from "Lauralee" of Vermont: *If you never pray for anyone else, please choose this one! I'm in such pain I think I'm going to die; pray a healing MIRACLE for me for kidney problems (disease? failure?); I'm so alone; no insurance!*

One might be tempted to see an implicit class politics in that last point, but to join the Prayer Team one must promise to refrain from explicitly political prayer. That is reserved for the professionals. The Prayer Team screen, whether viewed at the center or on a monitor at home, is split between "Individual Focus Requests," such as the above, and "Worldwide Focus" requests, which are composed by the staff of the World Prayer Center. Sometimes these are domestic—*USA: Pray for the Arlington Group, pastors working with Whitehouse to renew Marriage Amendm. Pray for appts. of new justices. Pray for Pastor meetings with Amb. of Israel, and President Bush. Lord, let them speak only your words, represent YOU! Bless!* But more often they are international— *N. KOREA: Pray God will crush demonic stronghold and communist regime of Kim Jung Il.*

The Iraqis come up often, particularly with regard to their conversion: *Despite the efforts of the news media, believing soldiers and others testify to the effective preaching of the Gospel, and the openness of so many to hear of Jesus. Pray for continued success!*

Another prayer request puts numbers to that news—*900,000 Bibles in the Arabic language distributed by Christians in Iraq . . .* And one explicitly aligns the quest for democracy in Iraq with the quest for more Christians in Iraq: *May the people stand for their rights, and open to the idea of making choices, such as studying the Bible . . .*

The most common Iraq-related prayer requests, however, are strategic in the most worldly sense, such as this one: *Baghdad—God, press back the enemy . . .*

Behind the piano player, the front range of the Rocky Mountains stretched across a floor-to-ceiling, semicircular window with a 270-degree view. Above him, a globe fifteen feet in diameter rotated on a metal spindle. When he took a break, I sat with him in the front row. His name was Jayson Tice, he was twenty-five, and he worked at Red Lobster. He'd grown up in San Diego and once, he said, he'd been good enough to play Division I college basketball. But he broke his ankle, and because the Marines promised him court time, he joined. There didn't turn out to be much basketball for him in the Marines, just what he described as "making bombs and missiles," so he didn't recommit, and decided to start over in a new city. His mother had moved to Colorado Springs, so Jayson and his girlfriend did, too; his mother left after three months, but Jayson had already decided that God, not his mother, had called him to the mountains. He discovered that a lot of the people he knew, working as waiters or store clerks or at one of the Air Force bases, felt the same way.

"Colorado Springs," Jayson told me, "this particular city, this *one* city, is a battleground"—he paused—"between good and evil. This is spiritual Gettysburg." Why here? I asked. He thought about it and rephrased his answer. "This place is just a watering hole for Christians. For God's people. Something extra powerful's about to pour out of this city. I hope not to stay in Colorado Springs, because I want to spread what's going on here. I'm a warrior, dude. I'm a warrior for God. Colorado Springs is my training ground."

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"There *was*," Pastor Ted said one afternoon in his office, "a significant influence exerted on the last election by Colorado Springs." He was meeting with me and another reporter, an Australian from a financial paper.

"You mean," the Australian asked, "almost like a force going out from Colorado Springs?"

A force—Pastor Ted liked that. He smiled and offered other examples. His favorite was the Ukraine, where, he claimed, a sister church to New Life had led the protests that helped sweep the pro-Western candidate into power. Kiev is, in fact, home to Europe's largest evangelical church, and over the last dozen years the Ukrainian evangelical population has grown more than tenfold, from 250,000 to 3 million. According to Ted, it was this army of Christian capitalists that took to the streets. "They're pro-free markets, they're pro-private property," he said. "That's what evangelical stands for."

In Pastor Ted's book *Dog Training, Fly Fishing, & Sharing Christ in the 21st Century*, he describes the church he thinks good Christians want. "I want my finances in order, my kids trained, and my wife to love life. I want good friends who are a delight and who provide protection for my family and me should life become difficult someday . . . I don't want surprises, scandals, or secrets . . . I want stability and, at the same time, steady, forward movement. I want the church to help me live life well, not exhaust me with endless 'worthwhile' projects." By "worthwhile projects" Ted means building funds and soup kitchens alike. It's not that he opposes these; it's just that he is sick of hearing about them and believes that other Christians are, too. He knows that for Christianity to prosper in the free market, it needs more than "moral values"—it needs customer value.

New Lifers, Pastor Ted writes with evident pride, "like the benefits, risks, and maybe above all, the excitement of a free-market society." They like the stimulation of a new brand. "Have you ever switched your toothpaste brand, just for the fun of it?" Pastor Ted asks. Admit it, he insists. All the way home, you felt a "secret little thrill," as excited questions ran through your mind: "Will it make my teeth whiter? My breath fresher?" This is the sensation Ted wants pastors to bring to the Christian experience. He believes it is time "to harness the forces of free-market capitalism in our ministry." Once a pastor does that, his flock can start organizing itself according to each member's abilities and tastes.

Which brings us back to "Order." Key to the growth of evangelicalism during the last twenty years has been a social structure of "cell groups" that allows churches to grow endlessly while maintaining orthodoxy in their ranks. New Life, for instance, has 1,300 cell groups, or "small groups," as Pastor Ted prefers to call them. Such a structure is not native to Colorado Springs; in fact, most evangelicals attribute it to Pastor Paul Cho, of South Korea, who has built a congregation of 750,000 using the cell-group structure. American megachurches that have adopted the cell model unaltered have had only partial success.

Pastor Ted's insight was in adapting this system for the affluence of the United States. South Korea, he notes, is on the "front lines" in the war against communism, "so they needed a strong chain-of-command system." But not so Americans. "Free-market globalization" has made us so free, he realized, that an American cell-group system could be mature enough to function just like a market. One of Pastor Ted's favorite books is Thomas Friedman's *The Lexus and the Olive Tree*, which is now required reading for the hundreds of pastors under Ted's spiritual authority across the country. From Friedman, Pastor Ted says he learned that everything, including spirituality, can be understood as a commodity. And unregulated trade, he concluded, was the key to achieving worldly freedom.

Free-market economics is a "truth" Ted says he learned in his first job in professional Christendom, as a Bible smuggler in Eastern Europe. Globalization, he believes, is merely a vehicle for the spread of Christianity. He means Protestantism in particular; Catholics, he said, "constantly look back." He went on: "And the nations dominated by Catholicism look back. They don't tend to create our greatest entrepreneurs, inventors, research and development. Typically, Catholic nations aren't shooting people into space. Protestantism, though, always looks to the future. A typical kid raised in Protestantism dreams about the future. A typical kid raised in Catholicism values and relishes the past, the saints, the history. That is one of the changes that is happening in America. In America the descendants of the Protestants, the Puritan descendants, we want to create a better future, and our speakers say that sort of thing. But with the influx of people from Mexico, they don't tend to be the ones that go to universities and become our research-and-development people. And so in that way I see a little clash of civilizations."

So the Catholics are out, and the battle boils down to evangelicals versus Islam. "My fear," he says, "is that my children will grow up in an Islamic state."

And that is why he believes spiritual war requires a virile, worldly counterpart. "I teach a strong ideology of the use of power," he says, "of military might, as a public service." He is for preemptive war, because he believes the Bible's exhortations against sin set for us a preemptive paradigm, and he is for ferocious war, because "the Bible's bloody. There's a lot about blood."

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Linda Burton was "specifically called by God" to Colorado Springs seventeen years ago, though at the time she thought that she was only running from a crack-addicted man who beat her. Linda was not a Christian at the time. She had married young and moved west; after her divorce, there had been many men, an abortion.

With the man who beat her she fathered a son, whom she named Aaron Michael, the "strong right hand of God." Linda took the baby and fled to Colorado Springs, which she remembered as pure and clean from a vacation she and the ex had once taken. She worked two jobs, one waiting tables at the best hotel in town, the other at Red Lobster. A friend at the hotel invited her to New Life, where she learned how her troubles were the result of demons and how to cast them out. Now Linda is an insurance agent, and she and Aaron Michael live in a suburban home. She hears voices, but they do not disturb her. "The Holy Spirit is a gentleman," she told me one morning over a basket of cinnamon muffins still warm from the oven.

Sitting across from me in her kitchen, she closed her big brown eyes and shushed herself. "I'm listening," she said quietly.

"To the TV?" I asked. In the next room, Aaron Michael was watching an action movie; the house was filled with the sound of explosions.

"No," said Linda. "To my Spirit." She opened her eyes and explained the process she had undergone to reach her refined state. She called it "spiritual restoration." Anyone can do it, she promised, "even a gay activist." Linda had seen with her own eyes the sex demons that make homosexuals rebel against God, and she said they are gruesome; but she did not name them, for she would not "give demons glory." They are all the same, she said.[3] "It's *radicalism*."

She reached across the table and touched my hand. "I have to tell you, the spiritual battle is very real." We are surrounded by demons, she explained, reciting the lessons she had learned in her small-group studies at New Life. The demons are cold, they need bodies, they long to come inside. People let them in in two different ways. One is to be sinned against. "Molested," suggested Linda. The other is to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. You could walk by sin—a murder, a homosexual act—and a demon will leap onto your bones. Cities, therefore, are especially dangerous.

It is not so much the large populations, with their uneasy mix of sinner and saved, that make Christian conservatives leery of urban areas. Even downtown Colorado Springs, presumably as godly as any big town in America, struck the New Lifers I met as unclean. Whenever I asked where to eat, they would warn me away from downtown's neat little grid of cafés and ethnic joints. Stick to Academy, they'd tell me, referring to the vein of superstores and prepackaged eateries—P. F. Chang's, California Pizza Kitchen, et al.—that bypasses the city. Downtown, they said, is "confusing."

Part of their antipathy is literally biblical: the Hebrew Bible is the scripture of a provincial desert people, suspicious of the cosmopolitan powers that threatened to destroy them, and fundamentalists read the New Testament as a catalogue of urban ills—sophistication, cynicism, lust—so deadly that one would be better off putting out one's own eye than partaking in their alleged pleasures. But the anti-urban sentiments of modern fundamentalists are also more specific to the moment in which they find themselves.

Three years ago, in the 2002 elections, Christian conservatives swept Georgia, the last Democratic bastion in the South. They toppled an incumbent Democratic governor, a war-hero Democratic senator, the state House speaker, the Democratic leader of the state Senate, and his son, the Democratic candidate for Congress in a majority black district that state Democrats had drawn up especially for him. The new Republican senator, Saxby Chambliss, and the new governor, Sonny Perdue, both conservatives and Christian, won not on "moral values" but on an exurban platform. The mastermind behind the coup was Ralph Reed, once of the Christian Coalition, who had been reborn as Georgia's Republican chairman. Reed remains a fundamentalist, the same man who once tested employees' commitment to "Christian values" by asking them if they supported the death penalty for adultery, but he was too canny to talk like that in public. The term "Christian," he'd learned, is a "divider," not a "unifier," so he had left overt faith behind. He backed candidates who ran under the mantra of the exurbs: "Shorter commutes. More time with family. Lower mortgages."

This troika of exurban ambition worked on multiple levels. Just as Nixon used marijuana and heroin in the 1960s as code for hippies and blacks, Reed devised a platform that conflated ordinary personal goals with fundamentalist values. "Shorter commutes" is a ploy that any old-time ward heeler would recognize. It means: let's move the good jobs out of the city. Atlanta, like Colorado Springs, has an urban core that Christian conservatives would just as soon see wither. "More time with family," of course, extends that promise of exurban jobs but also speaks in code to the fundamentalist preoccupation with "family"—that is, with defining it, with excluding not just gay couples but any combination not organized around "biblical" principles of "male headship."

As for "lower mortgages," they are lower in exurbs because cities subsidize them. The city pays the taxes that build the sewers and the roads for the exurbs. The city provides the organization that makes it possible. Exurbs are parasites. And what else does "lower mortgages" mean? More land. More space between you and your neighbors. And this, too, is necessary for Christian conservatism, which depends on the absence of conflict as one of its main selling points. For all its talk of community, it is wary of community's main asset: the conflict, and the resulting cultural innovation, born of proximity. But such cultural innovation is death to today's Christian conservatism, which tosses a gauzy veil of tradition over the big-box consumerism of its megachurches.

As contemporary fundamentalism has become an exurban movement, it has reframed the question of theodicy—if God is good, then why does He allow suffering?—as a matter of geography. Some places are simply more blessed than others. Cities equal more fallen souls equal more demons equal more temptation, which, of course, leads to more fallen souls. The threats that suffuse urban centers have forced Christian conservatives to flee—to Cobb County, Georgia, to Colorado Springs. Hounded by the sins they see as rampant in the cities (homosexuality, atheistic schoolteaching, ungodly imagery), they imagine themselves to be outcasts in their own land. They are the "persecuted church"—just as Jesus promised, and just as their cell-group leaders teach them.

This exurban exile is not an escape to easy living, to barbecue and lawn care. "We [Christians] have lost every major city in North America," Pastor Ted writes in his 1995 book *Primary Purpose*, but he believes they can be reclaimed through prayer—"violent, confrontive prayer."[4] He encourages believers to obtain maps of cities and to identify "power points" that "strengthen the demonic activities." He suggests especially popular bars, as well as "cult-type" churches. "Sometimes," he writes, "particular government buildings . . . are power points." The exurban position is one of strategic retreat, where believers are to "plant" their churches as strategic outposts encircling the enemy.

* * *

I returned to the World Prayer Center on Wednesday for a church staff meeting. The meeting of more than 100 employees began with "worship"—which means it started with a band, one of New Life's many "worship teams" of musicians. This one was composed of students in New Life's Worship and Praise School, a one-year college-credit program created to train and staff churches around the country. The students were all young and pretty, dressed in the kind of quality-cotton-punk clothing one buys at the Gap. "Lift up your hands, open the door," crooned the lead singer, an inoffensive tenor. Male singers at New Life and other megachurches are almost always tenors, their voices clean and indistinguishable, R&B-inflected one moment, New Country the next, with a little bit of early '90s grunge at the beginning and the end.

They sound like they're singing in beer commercials, and perhaps this is not coincidental. The worship style is a kind of musical correlate to Pastor Ted's free-market theology: designed for total

accessibility, with the illusion of choice between strikingly similar brands. (Pastor Ted prefers the term "flavors," and often uses Baskin-Robbins as a metaphor when explaining his views.) The drummers all stick to soft cymbals and beats anyone can handle; the guitarists deploy effects like artillery but condense them, so the highs and lows never stretch too wide. Lyrics tend to be rhythmic and pronunciation perfect, the better to sing along with when the words are projected onto movie screens. Breathy or wailing, vocalists drench their lines with emotion, but only within strict confines. There are no sad songs in a megachurch, and there are no angry songs. There are songs about desperation, but none about despair; songs convey longing only if it has already been fulfilled.

The idea of applying market economics to religion originated not within evangelicalism, nor even in the petri dishes of the laissez-faire think tanks in D.C., but with a sociologist from the University of Washington named Rodney Stark, whose work has won a broad readership beyond his discipline. Stark (who now teaches at Baylor, a Baptist university in Texas) and various collaborators began interpreting religious-affiliation data through the lens of neoliberal market theory in the 1980s. The very best sort of religious economy, insists Stark, is one unregulated by either the state or large denominations. Left to form, change, and die organically, Stark believes, churches will naturally come to meet the populace's diverse spiritual needs, which he divides into a spectrum of six "niches" akin to a left/right political scheme. He argues that the law of the market spurs new religious movements, which start out small, in "high tension" with the society around them, at the "ultra-conservative" end of the spectrum. As these sects grow, their tension usually decreases—that is, writes Stark, they dilute the "seriousness" of their faith—until they eventually drift to the "ultra-liberal" end. Implicit is that there is a natural and fairly steady demand for religion that needs only to find expression in a properly varied supply.

Despite its dense and academic prose, Stark's work has won a wide readership among local pastors, who have propagated his ideas through the cell-group structure. On the surface, at least, the evangelical enthusiasm for Stark's work might seem somewhat puzzling. Certainly Stark does celebrate the entrepreneurial, "ultra-conservative" church as the engine of religious vigor. And yet he also seems to promise fundamentalists that their eventual fate will be moderation, or pluralistic irrelevance, or both.

In fact, the analogy with free-market economics holds up quite neatly. Stark is an economist of religion; his theory tells him with confidence that unfettered markets will lead to competition, diversity, pluralism, a hundred flowers blooming. His fundamentalist adherents, by contrast, are like businessmen, who understand and approve of where the theory leads in practice: toward consolidation, toward control, toward manufacture of demand. What the most farsighted are doing—Pastor Ted chief among them—is fostering something like Stark's spectrum of "niches," but all within the confines of their individual megachurches. They are building aisles and aisles in which everyone can find something, but behind it all a single corporate entity persists, and with it an ideology.

In devising New Life's small-group system, Pastor Ted says that he asked himself and his staff a simple question: Do you like your neighbors? And, for that matter, do you even know your neighbors? The answers he got—the Golden Rule to the contrary—were "Not really" and "No." Okay, said Pastor Ted, so why would you want to be in a small group with them? His point was that arbitrary small groups would make less sense than self-selected groups organized around common interests. Hence New Life members can choose among small groups dedicated to motorcycles, or rock climbing, or homeschooling, or protesting outside abortion clinics.

But Pastor Ted's true genius lies in his organizational hierarchy, which ensures ideological rigidity even as it allows for individual expression. Not just anyone can lead a small group, much less a section; a battery of personality and spiritual tests must be undergone first, as well as an official background check. Once chosen, group leaders meet regularly with their own leaders in the chain of command, and members are encouraged to jump the chain and speak to a higher level if they think their leader is straying into "false teachings"—moral relativism, ecumenism, or even "Satanism," in the form of New Age notions such as crystal healing.

Whether the system is common sense or heresy itself—the Body of Christ atomized—is beside the point; New Lifers have found it powerfully persuasive. Pastor Ted has instituted a semester system, so that no one needs to be locked into a group he or she doesn't like for too long. And since New Life's cell groups don't limit themselves to Bible study, they function as covert evangelizing engines. In return, what Pastor Ted has given his flock are lifestyle choices.

* * *

Commander Tom Parker and his family live a long way from New Life, far south in a neighborhood of postage-stamp yards and houses without foundations. Commander Tom used to make computer chips; his wife is a maid. Their living room is two couches a leg-stretch apart, with Commander Tom's recliner between. An upright piano, painted red-and-white, is backed against one wall; a TV, no longer much used, squats against the other. When I visited, Commander Tom's wife stayed in the kitchen, but his son, Junior Commander T.J., joined us in the living room. The two men—T.J. is only fifteen, but he's been bar mitzvahed, about which more in a moment—owe their officer's ranks to the Royal Rangers, a Christian alternative to the Boy Scouts. The largest "outpost" of the Rangers in the country, 475 boys and men, rallies at New Life.

Royal Rangers wear khaki military uniforms and black ties. They study rope craft and smallbore shooting and "American Cultures." There is a badge for "Atomic Energy," which boys can earn by making scale models of a nuclear reactor. Mainly, though, Rangers earn merit badges for reading the Bible. Most boys go book by book, which earns them a special vest stitched over entirely in badges; but truly dedicated Rangers take it all in one giant swallow, a feat of reading for which they earn a single Golden Achievement Badge. T.J., who traveled to Los Angeles last year to claim second place in the regional Ranger of the Year competition, has such a Golden Achievement Badge. His favorite book is Ecclesiastes—"Vanity of vanities, all is vanity"—a moody, introspective scripture at odds with his demeanor. He is a sturdy boy, with a swimmer's shoulders and an honest, rectangular face. He would be a teen dream, no question, but T.J. doesn't meet many girls. He is homeschooled, his "hobby" is reading, and most of his out-of-the-house hours are dedicated to the Rangers, an all-male organization. T.J.'s purity ring, which he wears on a delicate silver chain, is a symbol of his commitment to virginity until marriage. It was given to him two years ago by Commander Tom on the occasion of T.J.'s bar mitzvah.

The bar mitzvah was Commander Tom's idea. A heavyset man with glasses and a mustache, Commander Tom decided his son deserved a ritual to mark his entrance into manhood, just like the Jewish people have. T.J. took as his text not a portion of Torah but the song "Shine," by a Christian rock band called the Newsboys. *Dull as dirt / You can't assert/The Kind of Light/That might persuade/A strict dictator to retire/Fire the army/Teach the poor origami*—unless, the song goes on to say, you "shine" with Holy Ghost power.

When T.J. was coming up in the Rangers, little boys started as "Straight Arrows" and proceeded from there to "Buckaroos." T.J. and Commander Tom are both members of an elite Ranger cadre known as FCF, Frontier Christian Fellowship, in which boys and men regress to pioneer life in pursuit of ultimate Christian manhood. Father and son are still Frontiersmen, which is the lowest level, but they dream of becoming Buckskin Men. "The problem," said T.J., "is that it takes time and money. Because you have to make an outfit. And it has to be out of leather."

"If you're a Frontiersman, you can't wear regular clothes," Commander Tom explained.

"You don't have to catch the deer yourself," said T.J. "You can just buy the leather at a store. But you gotta learn how to sew it."

"And you gotta make up something you can live off."

"A trade."

"Like making candles," said Commander Tom.

One day last August, Commander Tom had been at work, making computer chips, when for no apparent reason he found himself unable to move. When he regained control, the first thing he did was take himself to the doctor for an MRI. But the moment the nurse turned on the machine, his eyeballs felt as if they were popping; his hands clenched into claws. All he could do was whisper, "Turn . . . it . . . off." Electronics seem to exacerbate the condition. "I'm allergic," he said. He believes that years of working with powerful magnets have broken his "polars." His company moved him to a desk job, but the computer made his eyes wobble. He can't talk on a cell phone, and TV causes a meltdown. His company pays him a modest sum for disability. He wouldn't dream of suing. Mostly he reads the Bible, and *The Lord of the Rings*, over and over. "God keeps saying to me, 'Tom, this is not about you. It's about Me,'" he told me. "There's something going on. And God is just trying to get me ready."

In December, Commander Tom received a vision. It is not unheard of for ordinary New Lifers to experience visions, but most are wary about their provenance; what a secularist would call psychological they call satanic. But Commander Tom thinks that this one was real. He seemed close to tears as he told me the story. This is what he had seen: "Complete darkness over all of America. But there was a light coming down to the center of America," i.e., Colorado Springs. "And it was just a circle. And in it there were angels, and the angels were battling. And they were fighting hard as they could"—here Commander Tom's voice broke—"but they couldn't hold back the dark, and the Lord said to me, 'America has to repent, or this hole will close.'"

Commander Tom returned to the moment. "I'm not even saying I know what to do with it. It's just—that's what I see. And I pray. There's something going on here, and God's gonna explode it. There's gonna be an explosion from here bigger than anyone's ever seen."

Pastor Ted, he believed, would marshal the shock waves. "I think Pastor Ted is Gandalf," said Commander Tom. Tom had received a few mini-visions, just glimpses really, and in them he saw a pastor kneeling, praying, in spiritual battle.

"Who's the Balrog?" I asked, referring to a demon that nearly kills Gandalf, *the Lord of the Ring*s's heroic wizard. I expected Commander Tom to reply with the usual enemies, "the culture" and the homosexuals and the humanists. But the Balrog, he said, is *inside* Pastor Ted, and inside every Christian. Before the church can condemn the world, it must cleanse itself, thought Tom; he believed that American evangelicals were filthy with pride.

"Pride's dangerous," he said. He was thinking of the last presidential election. "Like a football game. Us against them." Commander Tom was pleased with the results but dismayed by the political power surging through his congregation. "That is not the same as"—he paused—"going *into* God. God does not see politics as a victory."

* * *

On any night of the week in Colorado Springs, if one knows where to look, one can join a conversation about God that will stretch late into the evening, regardless of workday schedules to be fulfilled the following morning. Some of these are cell groups, spin-offs from New Life or from the city's other churches, but others are more free-form. On a Thursday, I joined one as the guest of a friend of a friend named Lisa Anderson. Lisa is an editor at the International Bible Society. A few nights before, after I bought her several rounds of mojitos, she had promised to send me *Our City, God's Word*, a glossy New Testament produced by the IBS and included a few weeks before as an insert in the local paper. (To unanticipated effect; the city's Jews, as it turns out, were not pleased to find New Testaments in their driveways a few days after Hanukkah.) The cover image of *Our City, God's Word* is a surreal photo collage in which the Air Force Academy chapel—a row of silver, daggerlike structures that is probably the cruelest-looking church in America—is superimposed over office buildings and snow-draped Rockies. "Colorado Springs is a special place," declares the introduction. "The Bible is a special book."

Lisa's Thursday-night group met in a town house owned by a young couple with two children, Alethea (which means Truth), age three, and Justus (which means Justice), age one and a half. The father is assistant to the president of The Navigators, a conservative parachurch ministry, and the mother works for Head Start. Also in attendance were two graduates of the Moody Bible Institute and Lisa's boyfriend, a graduate student and a writer for Summit Ministries, a parachurch organization that creates curricula on America's "Christian heritage" for homeschoolers and private academies. There was also a gourmet chef.

When I walked in, an hour late, they were talking about Christian film criticism—whether such a thing could, or should, exist. Then they talked about the tsunami and wondered with concern whether any of the city's preachers would try to score points off it. When I mentioned that Pastor Ted already had, they cringed. I told them that at the previous Sunday's full-immersion baptism service, Pastor Ted had noted that the waves hit the "number-one exporter of radical Islam," Indonesia. "That's not a judgment," he'd announced. "It's an opportunity." I told them of similar analyses from Pastor Ted's congregation: one man said that he wished he could "get in there" among the survivors, since their souls were "ripe," and another told me he was "psyched" about what God was "doing with His ocean."

"That's not funny," one woman said, and the room fell silent.

James, an aspiring film critic with oval glasses and a red goatee, spoke up from the floor, where he'd been sitting cross-legged. "You know that Bruce Springsteen song on *Nebraska*, about the highway cop?" he asked. He was referring to a song called "Highway Patrolman," in which the patrolman's brother has left "a kid lyin' on the floor, lookin' bad" and the patrolman sets out to chase him down. Instead, he pulls over and watches his brother's "taillights disappear," thinking of "how nothin' feels better than blood on blood."

"He can't arrest his brother," James said, and quoted the song: "a man turns his back on family, well, he just ain't no good."

"I think that's how it is," James continued. "That's how I feel about Dobson, or Haggard. They're family. We have loyalties, even if we disagree."

I told James about a little man I had met in the hallway at New Life who, when I said I was from New York City, said, simply, "Ka-boom!" I told him also about Joseph Torrez, a New Lifer I had eaten dinner with, who, when describing the evangelical gathering underway in Colorado Springs, compared it to "Shaquille O'Neal driving down the lane, dunking on *you*." Torrez had said, "It's time to choose sides," a refrain I had heard over and over again during my time in Colorado Springs.

"So which is it?" I asked. "Which side are you on? Theirs? Are you ready to declare war on me, on my city?"

"No—"

“Then choose.”

“I—”

“We can’t,” Lisa interrupted, from the corner.

“We can,” said John, another Bible Society editor. “We *do*. Just by being here.”

* * *

The morning service on the second Sunday of 2005 was devoted to the marriage of Pastor Ted’s eldest son, Pastor Marcus. It began with worship, just like an ordinary service, but the light show was a royal purple-and-gold, the hymns more formal, the dancing more ecstatic. I sat with Linda Burton in the front row; she curtsied and bowed, over and over, her right hand sweeping the carpeted floor.

Pastor Ted wore a black suit and a red tie. Earlier in the week, at a staff meeting, he had announced that he would use the wedding as an illustration, and to that end he delivered a lengthy prenuptial presentation with slides, in which he laid out a fractal-like repeating pattern of relations, shrinking and expanding: that of God to man, reflected in that of man to wife, which is in turn a model for a godly society. Just as we conform ourselves to God’s will, so, said Ted, must “the Woman.” The Woman must take on her man’s calling, her man’s desire.

“Mmm-hmmm,” murmured Linda, eyes closed.

In return, Pastor Ted continued, the Woman gets the Man’s love; authority just wants to serve. “Total surrender!” he called. “True or false?”

“*TRUE!*” answered the 8,000 assembled.

The Man is the Christ; the Woman is the Body. He is coming; she is the church; she must open her doors. United, they are the Kingdom, ready for battle. “The Christian home,” preached Pastor Ted, “is to be in a constant state of war.” This made many so happy they put their hands in the air, antennae for spirit transmissions. “Massive warfare!” Ted cried out.

The language of the Christian right was, I realized, hardening, collapsing. “Spiritual war,” a metaphor as old as the Gospels, has been invoked for the sake of power before—the Crusades, the conquest of the Americas—but for most of Christian history it has been no more bellicose than “jihad,” a term that once referred primarily to internal struggle. But the imagination of the Christian right has failed, and its language has become all-encompassing, mapped across not just theology but also emotions; across not just the Church but the entire world.

Two gray-shirted footmen scurried down the main aisle, unrolling forty yards of white runner. A white spotlight swung around until it landed on burgundy drapes strung across the main entrance. Eight groomsmen and eight bridesmaids emerged, the men in tails and the women in sleeveless crimson, their hands clasped before them in white furry muffs. From the catwalk above fell fake snow, silhouetted against white lights strung over white trellises and white branches around the purple-lit stage.

Once the couple started back up the aisle, I made for an exit and rounded the arena so I could get a good spot. I wondered if there would be rice to throw, and if any guests would share theirs with a reporter. But when I came around to the main entrance, the great lobby was empty except for the greeters hanging around the café tables. Had Marcus and Sarah given us the slip? Then the doors opened, and the couple emerged, alone, their wedding shoes clicking across the marble. They looked like tired actors leaving a set.

The sliding doors of the main entrance whispered open, and Marcus and Sarah walked through. It was a brisk day, blue skies fading to white on the horizon, too cold to be crossing New Life’s vast parking lot in a sleeveless wedding gown, but what could they do? Marcus hadn’t arrived early enough to get a prime parking spot. It was too cold for me: I watched from inside. Sarah’s veil snapped behind her like a white flag. At an SUV—no tin cans, no decorations—about a hundred yards off, Marcus fumbled in his pockets. It seemed like he might have forgotten his keys or, worse, locked them in the car. The pair looked helpless, peering in the SUV’s windows; for a moment, I thought I was going to have to call for someone to jimmy the newlyweds’ door. But they figured it out. Then they got into their SUV and drove away. As far as I could tell, I was the only one who took any pictures.

Notes

1. The New Lifers I spoke with afterward loved Pastor Larry's Underworld metaphor but laughed at how backward he was in his reference to tattoos. New Life's youth ministries are filled with tattooed and pierced prayer warriors. [Back]

2. All the paintings accompanying this article are works by Blackshear that hang in the World Prayer Center. [Back]

3. The life of the gay man, in the evangelical imagination, seems to be an endless succession of orgasms, interrupted only by jocular episodes of male bonhomie. The gay man promises Christian men a guilt-free existence, the garden before Eve. As such, he is not just tempting but temptation embodied; “the Enemy,” to whom Linda often refers. [Back]

4. Pastor Ted is aware that his martial plans alarm some outsiders; in Primary Purpose he writes that when he began his campaign for Colorado Springs, “spiritual warfare was not a popular subject. . . . I didn't speak publicly about my own experiences.” Even today, in his more mainstream position atop the NAE, Ted's belief in less than full disclosure persists. Last fall, when the evangelical journalist Ayelish McGarvey asked Pastor Ted why President Bush, as a Christian, had not apologized for the false assertions used to justify the Iraq war, or for the dishonest smears marshaled on his campaign's behalf, Ted said: “I think if you asked the President these questions once he's out of office, he'd say, ‘You're right. We shouldn't have done it.’ But right now if he said something like that, well, the world would spin out of control! . . . Listen, I think [we Christian believers] are responsible not to lie, but I don't think we're responsible to say everything we know.”