

1. Clarksville, Tennessee

Interstate 40 coils tightly coming down from Appalachia—hairpin turns cutting through green mountainside, skinny lanes flanked by guard rails and concrete barriers. There really is no easy way across the spine of the Blue Ridge. I have tried plenty. By now I should know better than to pass tractor trailers on these tight curves, but I'm late and temptation wins. I slam the accelerator.

What was I thinking driving nine hours to a Pentecostal tent revival when I've got to be back in Charlotte for a wedding tomorrow afternoon? Fall is revival season in the South. It's not like I couldn't have found something a lot closer to home.

Brother Anthony Wynn, Anointed Country Preacher of Miracle Deliverance Tabernacle, is a televangelist of sorts, but his church has only about 150 members. When I called the number on his website, Wynn answered his own phone.

He asked if I'd been around many Pentecostal churches.

I told him I grew up Episcopalian.

He invited me to attend and then warned, "Pentecostals are some of the meanest and craziest people you are likely to meet."

For nearly two years of research and travel, I had found reasons to put off visiting those churches that named themselves spirit-filled. I had heard stories of cult-like behavior. I didn't want to find myself hounded or harassed. Pentecostals' mode of worship seemed strange and possibly dangerous—speaking in tongues, shaking, prophesying, barking like dogs or rolling around on the floor.

I imagined myself trapped in the midst of the spectacle, helplessly observing the chaos. Worse, what if I found myself caught up in it?

If you had told me five years ago that I would be spending my Friday night at a Holy Ghost tent revival, I never would have believed you. Then again, I never expected to spend this long in the South, either. My plan was to raise children and write books in an old stone farmhouse with my husband back in my native New England, or maybe the Pacific Northwest.

I'm not here because I got religion. I guess I've always had religion, or at least a low-level willingness to remain open to the possibility of God. The universe contained both meaning and mystery. That much was obvious. Who was to say that what my parents taught me was entirely untrue?

Going through college and early adulthood, I had people directly challenge my faith and assure me that in time, I would grow out of it. Religion was fine for weddings, funerals, and other rituals of life, but really that's all it was—kid's stuff. A smart girl like me would eventually see through this. Maybe because I was stubborn, this made me all the more determined not to give up on Christianity.

First in Boston, then in Charlotte, I joined progressive, multiracial congregations with a strong commitment to social justice. Our services were vibrant, our literacy and afterschool ministries commendable, but I still had questions. After 9/11, the Iraq War, and the re-election of George Bush, my turmoil only intensified. How could the same names, texts, and symbols mean such different things to different people? Was religion just a convenient cover for attitudes we already held—for the good deeds we would have done

anyway, or else for the prejudices of culture and place?

And how did faith relate to the rest of my life, to Bloody Mary brunches that lasted from noon to nine, to late nights at the Milestone and the Penguin, to the hipster intellectual art chick persona I had worked so hard to cultivate? I sensed an invisible wall between me and my friends, as if they feared I might start proselytizing at any moment.

The South contains more liberal churches than you might expect, simply because so many people here go to church. But we are islands immersed in a sea of biblical literalism and atonement theology. I could easily accept that different religions could be seeking the same God. I wasn't so sure about the fundamentalists within my own religion. I could think of only one way to find out.

What if I actually tried talking to them?

Veering northwest on I-24, the road gets empty, although it's early on a Friday evening. I see giant white smokestacks rising out of the forest, but few other signs of human habitation. After leaving the freeway, there's still a good 30 miles to my destination. Clarksville has the bleakness I associate with military towns in the South. Factories and railroad tracks near the river appear to be abandoned. Downtown is full of crude cinderblock buildings, huge patriotic billboards, topless bars, ammo shops, and of course, churches.

Fort Campbell, home of the Army's 101st Airborne Screaming Eagles, is a few miles west of city limits. Its boundaries roughly parallel the route I am taking, but I don't see any helicopters out doing maneuvers. After a stretch of strip malls and lonely motels, only farms and houses remain

to punctuate thick woods. Vegetation overhangs the narrow divided highway. I know that I'm close when I spot the first handwritten sign pointing the way.

The tent revival is impossible to mistake for anything else, except perhaps a circus camped in the middle of the woods. The tent is large, with red and white stripes. It glows amiably as twilight settles over the hills. The evening is chilly—unusual for late September, but of course, Clarksville is north of Charlotte. I choose comfort over professionalism and pull a thick gray fleece on top of my crisp black blazer.

I have been warned that Pentecostals don't trust outsiders and have strict dress codes for women. I don't know how they will react to me. Last month I dyed my hair back to boring, natural brown so I could blend in better for this project. But I drew the line at driving nine hours in a skirt and pantyhose.

To my relief, a man walks over to my car, extends his hand and walks me down the gravel drive to the tent. His name is Mark and his young son is Colton. They moved here from Michigan two years ago with their pastor, William Wiggins.

"I didn't have a job or anything when I got here, but I found a job in three days as a meat cutter," says Mark.

Wiggins' church, Love Tabernacle Ministries, is hosting tonight's event. Brother Anthony Wynn is the guest preacher. Inside, the tent is nearly empty but the gospel band is playing like it's a full house, with a fast, hard-driving honky tonk beat. The women on stage all wear long skirts while the men have pressed pants and ties. I learn later that this is the Wiggins family band. They grew up traveling and performing together, back in Michigan. The pastor's wife is

playing guitar.

I recognize Anthony and Shelia Wynn from the photos on their website. They look to be in their late thirties or early forties. Shelia has vivid blue eyes and wears her blonde hair in Farah Fawcett waves. Anthony is tall and thin, with slicked-back sandy hair and a warm smile.

They greet me like an old friend and thank me for coming all this way. “The presence of the Lord is just so sweet here tonight,” Shelia remarks. “Can you feel it?”

Maybe it is the simple euphoria of finally being out of the car after all those hours of driving, but I think I know what she is talking about. There is warmth here, despite the chilly night—a sense of comfort and welcome among strangers.

“Our daddy bought his first tent in ’66. I was six years old then,” Brother Anthony Wynn tells me as we wait for the space to fill up. “In ’83 I got my first tent. This is probably tent number ten or twelve. There’s not as many tents as there used to be. It’s kind of a highway and hedge ministry. No walls.

“We rode out some tornado weather in Wilkesboro, North Carolina, with hundred mile winds bending stakes. I had a tent tore up near Pennington Gap, Virginia in a storm. Tore one end of it. Had to take it down, sew it up, and have it ready by the next service.”

Wynn recalls a visit to Harlan, Kentucky.

“A minister didn’t like us because we were talking about the Holy Ghost. He tried to get us run out of town. I really felt like the Lord had sent me there. I rented the lot for \$75, but then the businessman that rented me the lot didn’t give a receipt... We weren’t liked. We weren’t wanted. I just felt the

Enemy was fighting us for some reason. I called my daddy and family and got some of them to come up—they drove all the way up from Georgia to Kentucky to be with us and help us pray.

“On that Thursday they told me they was going to get a warrant for me, so I went up on the mountain to pray about daylight. About seven o’clock I knew I’d touched the Lord and I come off the mountain. The Harlan County Chief of Police came by and he said ‘Mr. Wynn, I heard you preach last night and I feel like you’re here to help our people. They said they’re going to get a warrant for you, and if they do, I’ll have to arrest you or let you leave town. But why don’t you just go ahead and stay and see if they do something?’

“I felt the Lord had delivered me. So we went ahead and stayed. And my mother in law come that night and give her heart to the Lord and got healed. So that’s probably why the Enemy was fighting us.”

He continues.

“We’ve had tent revivals in Indiana, North Carolina, Alabama, Georgia, Tennessee, Kentucky, Virginia, West Virginia, Florida, and Texas,” says Brother Wynn, pausing while the music plays on.

“Our desire is to tell people that Jesus loves them. Go to where the people are. Some come from curiosity. Some come to hear the music. Some come to please a friend. A lot of them end up getting touched and their lives change.”

His daddy is still living, fasting five months out of the year and preaching at a one-room church in Copperhill, Tennessee. I am confused because Wynn sometimes refers to his family being from Georgia and sometimes from Tennessee. Later I

check my road atlas and learn that his daddy's hometown is on the state line where Georgia, Tennessee, and North Carolina meet—an hour away from the nearest interstate, national forest on all sides, and only a few miles from the schoolhouse where the modern-day Pentecostal movement was rumored to begin.

Christianity is evolving and mutating again, a strain that first grew in the Blue Ridge Mountains spreading rapidly across the globe, continuing to change and bifurcate. The 1906 Azusa Street Revival in downtown Los Angeles is usually considered the birth of modern Pentecostalism, but the Shearer Schoolhouse Revival in the southwest corner of North Carolina predates it by a decade. The movement that followed held special appeal for the poor and disenfranchised, allowing women a greater role in worship and encouraging interracial services, even in the rural Jim Crow-era South.

Over time, the movement split along doctrinal and racial lines: Assemblies of God, Church of God, Apostolic, Holiness, and Oneness churches, the “Signs Following” snake handlers, and countless smaller sects and unaffiliated churches. Followers are typically strict in their codes of behavior (no alcohol or gambling, no makeup, pants, or short hair for women) and exuberant in their modes of worship.

Today, Pentecostalism is the fastest growing branch of Christianity, with at least 500 million members worldwide. It has huge strength in the developing world, particularly Latin America and Africa. Through the charismatic movement, it has made inroads into Catholicism and mainline Protestant denominations as well. Speaking in tongues is believed to be proof of God's favor, a manifestation of the Holy Spirit first

recorded in the book of Acts, revealed to the Apostles on the day of Pentecost after Christ's ascension to Heaven.

Pentecostals believe that they are carrying out a mission suppressed for nearly two thousand years. They consider the spontaneous mass revivals of the early 20th century to be the most important religious development since the days of the early Christians. The Protestant Reformation or Constantine's conversion of the Roman Empire would pale in comparison. History has yet to prove them wrong.

The opening prayer is the first sign that something is different about this service. As people come to the microphone to speak, a cacophony of voices from the crowd accompanies them. Murmured individual prayers overlap and blend together. Some of the prayers are not in English.

Speaking in tongues has distinctive and alien sound—short syllables repeated over and over, interspersed with longer words and phrases resembling Hebrew or another language outside the Indo-European family tree. It's eerily similar to the sounds my husband makes while talking in his sleep, especially if he is feverish or having restless dreams.

One of the singers from the band walks up to the microphone. Her teeth are slightly crooked and she wears a colorful striped skirt with a slit on one side.

"I don't know if you believe in the healing power of the Lord, but I felt the Lord with me in the ER," she proclaims. "My pastor come in while they were doing their thing, laid his hands upon me, and proceeded to pray... the doctor was saying one second, 'Mrs. Hall, Mrs. Hall, you're having a stroke.' After the pastor prayed, the doctor said, 'Mrs. Hall,

you're feeling better aren't you! Mrs. Hall, you're starting to move your mouth on one side.' And that's when I knew all was well."

More music follows, and more prayers: prayers for anyone who does not know the Lord Jesus, prayers for the troops in Iraq, prayers for a young man in a motorcycle accident, prayers for those who got lost on the way to the tent revival tonight and are late as a result.

Stragglers keep coming, and at one point an entire caravan rolls in. Little old ladies in jean jackets with white hair piled high take seats alongside parents, teenagers, and children. A playpen gets set up in one corner of the tent. It's cold enough to see your breath and many of the folding metal chairs are still empty, but the pace quickens. People clap and move around. The floor is shaking from the amp.

I have often wondered why people raise their hands when they feel moved by the Spirit. Is it to reach out and touch some unseen force emanating toward them? Or is it the ancient gesture of the witness stand, raising one hand to testify?

Brother Wiggins returns to the pulpit and in his heavy upper Midwest accent, introduces Brother Wynn, guest preacher. Wynn sings before he preaches, an old gospel tune called "I'll keep holding onto Jesus," backed by three guitars and drums.

"I believe God has some good memories of tents," he begins. "The Tabernacle used to be in a tent. I believe sometimes He just shows up in a special, special way. People come when it's cold out. They bring their babies. Heaven rejoices."

Wynn preaches a familiar evangelistic message: “Jesus loved us when we were yet sinners.”

He reminisces about evangelizing with his daddy, in tents and door-to-door. Then he talks about his own relationship with God and starts to cry. The preaching goes through cycles of rising and falling emotion. At times, Wynn breaks into in a chorus of hallelujahs, at other times, into tongues. He ends by asking everyone to join hands and pray. People start coming up to the front, where the altar rail would be if this tent had one. He moves among them, blessing and laying on hands.

I decide I will go up to the front and ask for a blessing. This is not something I have done before, not at any other church. Anthony Wynn prays with me, placing his hands over mine. He prays for the success of my book, that it will find the right audience and be an instrument for God’s will. He prays that I may one day have an even greater, deeper experience of the Lord.

I am bemused by that last part (a reminder that in the eyes of these people, I am half-saved at best) but I sense no malice or condemnation.

After the service I chat a bit more with Shelia Wynn. She says that she always accompanies her husband on tent revivals. Most of the time, their two teenaged sons come too. It startles me to realize Shelia and Anthony are only a few years younger than my own parents.

I walk around talking to various members of the Wiggins clan, and to Bill, a 70-year-old retired General Electric factory worker from Murfreesboro, Tennessee. Bill came to

the Pentecostal faith late in life. He has never received the gift of tongues, he says, but that doesn't bother him.

"When I go home tonight, I'll go outside and look at the sky and pray awhile. I have two kitty cats that go with me, Percy and Tabby. Percy will get up on my chest and look at me. I do that every night," he tells me.

"I live in the country and I'm close to the Lord. I don't know where He is. I don't know how big He is. But I know He's there."

2. Charlotte, North Carolina

The motel in Clarksville is the worst place I have yet stayed—cockroaches scuttling in the corners and a noisy argument down the hall. It's not a major inconvenience, though, since I need to be on the road by 6 AM on Saturday.

The next day, despite my best intentions, I end up running late once again. The wedding ceremony takes place in a soaring stone Presbyterian church in an old Charlotte neighborhood, the kind of place where hats and white gloves are no longer required, but one still feels faintly inadequate without their protection. Blake and I slip in just as the sanctuary doors are closing. The reception is at a renovated theater loft across town.

My friend from book club is marrying the son of a former North Carolina governor. They met at a NASCAR race on

an outing for Wake Forest alumni. The wedding is actually very understated by the standards of Charlotte's elite, but it is still a vastly different world from where I was the night before. None of the guests from fine old families introduce themselves, but our table is too busy sampling the signature cocktails to mind.

Next month I will be 30 years old. Blake and I have lived in Charlotte for most of our adult lives. We have a dog and a cute house in a fashionable, inner ring neighborhood. Our professional lives keep us more than busy. We have both served on philanthropic boards and have even been invited to some of the "right" parties. But something is still missing. Most of my old friends have either left town or settled down to raise a family. What's stopping us, I wonder? By now, this should be our world too. I wonder if it will ever actually feel that way.

A few days after returning from the tent revival, I call back Love Tabernacle Ministries in Clarksville. William Wiggins has developed laryngitis after preaching for seven straight days, so his daughter Tracey gives the interview instead.

I learn that she is the woman who got up that first night and told the story of being healed from a mini-stroke. This is not an unprecedented event in Tracey's 39 years of life.

Before the birth of her first son, Elijah, she says, ultrasound scans showed a condition called encephalocele, a neural tube defect where the brain develops outside the skull.

"I respected the doctors," she tells me. "I accepted their advice and diagnosis and prognosis. I said, 'I am not in denial. I am taking what you're telling me to God in prayer.'

The neurosurgeon wrote on the medical records that we had strong faith.”

Despite the severity of the condition, Tracey opted to continue with the pregnancy. “When Elijah was born, all of the brain was in the skull. The brain did grow and develop with him. A sac had formed and had sealed the opening of his skull. So it was a miracle.” After several operations in his first two years, Elijah was able to live a normal life. “He’s a bright child,” says his mother. “He got up and testified for the tent revival.”

Tracey credits God with saving her from an accident at a four-way stop sign, and for helping her bricklayer husband, Scotty, learn how to read as an adult. “He wanted to read the Bible for himself,” she says. “People need to know that God can answer that prayer too.”

It’s hard to see a downside in overcoming adult illiteracy, but I wonder about the rest of her stories. If you believe that God can step in and intervene at any time, does that make you less likely to wear a seatbelt or take prenatal vitamins? Would not a God so personally active and involved remove a certain level of responsibility and autonomy from human beings? And would you not feel anger, even hatred, any time that God did permit illness, injury, or death?

Tracey believes that God told her to move the family’s ministry from Michigan to Tennessee. “I had just sat down with a fresh cup of coffee,” she recalls. “There was something on the news about Tennessee... I felt the presence of the Lord. I remember crying. Did I hear an audible voice? No. It was as if somebody had just whispered to me, this is going to happen.”

She says that when she told her husband, he said that he had received the same revelation in prayer, but kept it to himself to wait and see. She talked to her father, the pastor, and he told her that he too had felt the ministry would move.

And so, two years ago, like Abraham from the land of Ur, like Lot and his unfortunate wife, like the Pilgrims, the Quakers, the Moravians, and the Anabaptists seeking religious freedom in the North American colonies, the Wiggins family moved from Michigan to the promised land of Tennessee. Tracey and her husband had their own bricklaying business back in Michigan. They owned a house in the country with 11 acres of land. They put everything up for auction. She says that their income dropped by 60 percent the first year after the move, but they have since made up the difference.

“I believe that you gain knowledge of the Lord through experience,” says Tracey. “All I can do is tell you what God has done for me and how he brought me through.”

I think about all the time that Blake and I have spent poring over the Places Rated Almanac, wondering if we should move out to join friends on the West Coast, or closer to my family in New England, or else back to New Mexico, where my husband grew up. How nice to have the decision made for you, to hear a voice in your head that says, “Go there.”

I wonder if God has ever spoken to me like that. What if I’m just not listening in the right way? Would I believe the message I received? What kind of sign would I not dismiss as the power of suggestion or chance?

It's strange. I have always felt more connected to the Holy Spirit than to the other two branches of the Trinity. Maybe it was because Spirit seemed less gendered than Father and Son, invisible and immanent, not confined by human form or human roles. Maybe it was just that people at church talked less about the Spirit, leaving me free to discover this aspect of God in my own time, on my own terms. I am deeply protective of these experiences, and honestly, not all that comfortable writing about them. So I guess I am automatically suspicious of any religion that claims to deliver the Holy Spirit on demand.

Glossolalia, or speaking in tongues, is a recognized scientific phenomenon. A 2006 study by the University of Pennsylvania showed changes in blood flow to the frontal lobes, parietal lobes, and left caudate—a different pattern of brain activity than during other types of religious practice such as meditation or singing hymns. This is not to say that one particular pattern of brain activity is by definition more holy than another, or that some Pentecostals don't fake. (There is often intense pressure to speak in tongues, since it is believed to be evidence that an individual has been saved.)

And then there is the psychology of crowds—a particular emotional state that builds when you combine pheromones with a powerful rhythm. The membrane between self and group becomes a little more permeable. You feel the current, the energy... you want to get swept up, to lose yourself in the collective moment.

One month after the tent revival I felt the same burst of release and renewal under a very different tent—at a

Halloween party outside an abandoned warehouse, wearing a black bustier with vinyl pants and dancing to a thudding techno beat.

I have seen young women at concerts spontaneously raise their arms toward the sound emanating from speakers in exactly the same gesture used by Pentecostals and evangelicals. Did they learn it attending Christian youth rallies in their teens, I wonder, or is it something more innate?

Even if this phenomenon can be described as a purely biological response to stimuli, I suspect that people tap into something old and deep, even sacred, at all these gatherings—just as I suspect it is not coincidence that the music in a Pentecostal church sounds a lot like rock and roll. Some 1700 years after the Greco-Roman pantheon fell out of favor, Apollo and Dionysus are still at war. As much as Christianity has tried to fashion itself as the religion of light and order, something dark and ecstatic stirs at its core.

3. Athens, Tennessee

I figured that I should see Brother Anthony Wynn preach again, this time at his home church. Although not as far away as the tent revival, it's still a five hour drive. The town of Athens seems small and pleasant, tucked into the western foothills of the Smokies. It boasts two small colleges, several attractive residential neighborhoods, and even a few blocks of downtown. In another life, I suppose I could have found myself in a place like this, teaching Shakespeare, Toni

Morrison, and William Faulkner to undergraduates, settled and content.

When I turn on CNN in my motel room on Saturday night, the main topic of speculation seems to be John Kerry's ill-timed gaffe about the educational attainments of soldiers in Iraq. The midterm election is only three days away. Democrats are expected to make some gains, but no one really believes they will win back both houses of Congress—including every close Senate race except the one here in Tennessee.

The map that I printed out seemed clear enough, but the next morning I discover that it bears about as much resemblance to Athens, Tennessee as it does to Athens, Greece. After 30 minutes of circling and retracing my route, I pull into a gap in the median and stop to consider my options. A sheriff's car pulls up almost immediately.

The officer wants to know if I need help. I ask if he knows where Miracle Deliverance Tabernacle is.

"You'll never get there," he says. "Follow me."

I follow the sheriff's car back to downtown, along a side street, then up another twisting street and along a country road that eventually turns to dirt. I am forced to agree that there is no way I could have gotten here on my own. Finally we arrive at the church's gravel parking lot.

"Brother Wynn has a real good reputation in town," the officer tells me. After I thank him and assure him that I can get back to town on my own, he drives off and leaves me in the parking lot. The service should have started 20 minutes ago, so I am surprised and relieved when another car pulls

up. The elderly woman in a black and white hounds tooth jacket gets out and introduces herself as Zilpha, proudly announcing that she is a newlywed, married six months ago. Her husband is waiting inside, but she was running just a little bit late this morning. We walk inside together, and I grab a seat next to hers.

The church has a wood paneled ceiling and a dark green carpet. Two gilded lion sculptures and a painting of a lion in a temperate forest occupy the front of the sanctuary, near the altar. Otherwise, the space contains little ornamentation.

The crowd numbers about 120 people. Given the church's rural location, I am surprised that a substantial minority are nonwhite. The African-American couple to my right greets me warmly. Most people are standing up, praising God in English or speaking in tongues. One woman with long brown hair and a red blazer is ululating with her arms upraised, an unearthly, keening sound. She walks over to Zilpha and wraps her arms around her, continuing to pray in her own unknowable language.

When Wynn comes to the pulpit, he starts by singing into the microphone, just as he did at the tent revival. I don't recognize the song, but the main refrain is "I want to be like Jesus." After his opening greeting and prayer, he preaches about the approaching election. He does not tell anyone how to vote, but when he says, "A nation divided against itself cannot stand," and talks about how sometimes a family just has to make a decision and stick with it, his position is not hard to guess. The theme of Wynn's sermon is conflict, external and internal.

"Satan is happy if he can get a conflict going on inside of you," he warns, shaking a plastic bottle covered in a paper

bag. The bottle is supposed to represent alcohol, but since Wynn doesn't touch the stuff, he uses Gatorade instead.

“As a little boy, I remember my mom screaming and crying,” he tells his flock. “A man was standing in the room with an ax drawn back. Our neighbor had got drunk and hauled the man's horse and let the horse fall out of the trailer, and he dragged an expensive horse for five miles because he was drunk. Because of drunkenness, one neighbor's trying to kill another with an ax. And if my mom hadn't got between them...”

Wynn goes on. “I've seen maggots on the table, and my mom changed a little baby's diaper that hadn't been changed in a week because mama and daddy were drunk, and these babies eating bugs and maggots.”

By now he is shouting, and the crowd shouts back. “A part of me's got to die,” he tells them, “in order to get closer to Jesus.”

Emotion surges and ebbs and builds again.

“Take it to the altar and pray it through,” he exhorts.

The congregation begins to move forward, while musicians sing the words to Psalm 51: “Create in me a clean heart and renew a right spirit within me.”

As before, there seems to be no set order to the final portion of worship, just a long interlude of prayers, tongues, and music, followed by Wynn's closing prayer. He ends by asking God, “Please, don't let the Enemy use this message and beat somebody up.”

After the service I talk to Betty, the African-American woman sitting on the other side of me. She and her husband have been coming to this church for seven years. She is proud

that she was able to get Wynn's sermons carried on a mostly black Christian radio station in Georgia.

I ask what appeals to her about this particular church and pastor. She answers without hesitation. "He doesn't compromise."

The Wynns invite me to lunch after worship is over, along with Alice, the church secretary, and one other family. We exchange cell phone numbers and I join the caravan. Our destination turns out to be a chain restaurant called Charley's, in a strip mall near the freeway. Two tables pushed together are barely big enough for our party. I have always looked down on these types of restaurants, but the food actually turns out to be pretty good. I discover that I share with the rest of the table a strong preference for Dr. Pepper, above all other soft drink choices.

Matt is a truck driver, in his mid thirties, with close-cropped dark hair and intelligent brown eyes. He wears a long-sleeved black work shirt with a black t-shirt underneath, and I sense a bit of the rebel about him. When I compliment him on how friendly everyone has been at church, he just laughs.

"It kind of makes you wonder when you drive back into those woods what you're getting into, don't it?"

He says he and his wife Amy moved here from Chattanooga after watching Wynn's television broadcasts. "You can tell he means what he says. With a lot of these televangelists, it's a pastor's get-rich-quick scheme. There are so many phonies out there."

The rest of the table is busy talking amongst themselves. “I’ve got full confidence that he’s not just coming up with a sermon that he’s buying off the Internet or something like that, but he’s really spending time with God to get a message,” Matt continues.

“You can’t buy your way to salvation,” he insists. “There isn’t one thing God needs from me. Everything from God comes from grace. It’s free.”

Eventually, Brother Wynn turns back to me. I learn that he worked as a mechanic in a Duracell factory before he started preaching. He tells me about a time when he growing up and the family was hungry, without any groceries.

“The Lord woke my daddy up about three o’ clock in the morning, and daddy started driving with a friend,” he recalls. “They came upon a wrecked chicken truck. My daddy’s driving a pickup. The state patrol officer comes up and says we’ve got a truckload of frozen chicken in sealed boxes. Would you haul some of it off? And we had a nice empty freezer... The Holy Ghost, it’s with you 24 hours.”

Wynn talks about his hopes for the audio ministry—a volunteer is sharing CDs with soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan—and his hopes for the church.

“Pentecostal people put a lot of emphasis on speaking in tongues,” he acknowledges. “But that’s just a drop in the bucket. The Holy Ghost, it’s a comforter. It’s literally the Spirit of the Lord. It’ll teach you. It’ll warn you when there’s trouble ahead to pray. It gives you peace. It’s a real experience, and it literally lives in your heart. It’s not just an emotional feeling. I know how it’s affected me, and I’d like to see every young person in our church receive it.”

Recalling my conversation with Tracey, I ask my recurring question. How do you know that the Holy Ghost is speaking and not just your own hopes, desires, and fears?

“He will never contradict the Bible,” he tells me.

So we are back to the old literalism debate. It’s not one I relish having, not here, sitting around a crowded restaurant table with people who have shown me nothing but warmth and courtesy. I let the point slide.

“When you don’t do right, the Holy Ghost will gouge you,” Brother Wynn continues. “You can’t sleep, you can’t rest. You might offend somebody or hurt somebody... He’s trying to make you get it right. Then if you override that, your heart gets harder and colder. The Holy Ghost is really there to try to teach you to be like Jesus, to love people, to treat people right.”

If only every part of the Bible agreed with the spirit Jesus preached! What about the verses in the Old and New Testament that condemn and judge, that advocate violence, subjugate women, condone slavery? What about the contradictions that show up from the very first chapter of Genesis on?

Trying to think of a safe way to pursue the topic, I ask why people would still need the Spirit, if they have the Word for guidance?

“It’s like algebra,” Brother Wynn answers quickly. “You need the instructor to explain it to you. That’s one reason we have so many denominations. People have interpreted the Bible without the Holy Ghost... The Holy Ghost will never tell me one thing and you another.”

So I guess that's the question. How do you listen, and whose voice do you trust?

It's late in the afternoon when I walk out of the restaurant with my leftover chicken salad in a box, dazed from an onslaught of hugs and entreaties to visit again. The people I met here and in Clarksville defy my stereotypes and expectations. I don't dismiss their experience, but I can't accept all of their answers. I am not even sure that we are searching for the same God.

I have a confession to make. I am not typically someone who spends time listening to preachers on the Internet, but the reason I decided to drive to that tent revival was a sermon I heard online. When I stumbled across Anthony Wynn's website, what struck me most was the preacher's raw need. His voice trembled as he prayed for anointing. He compared his soul to a wounded deer, panting after the Lord. He talked about how the devil will follow you to Wal-Mart when you're depressed and "get you to spend \$100 you don't need to spend." He railed against ministries that deceive and exploit their followers. At times he broke into tongues. At other times he sang plaintively, almost crying. At the end, he prayed for God to touch the crowd, "but don't touch us so much that we'll never be thirsty again."

I knew what he was talking about. I knew that sense of wounded need, anyway, knew it all too well. But I am still thirsty.

Driving home, I remember another visit to this state, a little over a year ago. I was covering a televised rally at a Nashville megachurch in support of President Bush's nominees to the

Supreme Court. The event was predictable enough: songs of praise and salvation, a giant cross flanked by equally huge American flags, and rhetoric alternating between the triumphant and the paranoid. What stayed with me longer were the conversations I had with liberal Christians on the same trip.

Our small focus group met over pizza in the basement of Saint Ann's Episcopal Church in East Nashville. Three women and one man spoke eloquently and passionately of their convictions. I admired their work to improve Nashville public schools and affirm the place of gays and lesbians within the church. I felt the pain of their isolation within a conservative part of the country and within their own faith communities. One woman, a writer of Christian's children's books, was afraid to reveal her name for fear of retaliation by her large evangelical publisher.

Towards the end of the session, Tom, the oldest member of the group, casually remarked that he did not believe in heaven. In his view, God was simply another word for the process of growth, change, and relationship. I would never want to dictate what anyone else should believe. I can't tell you who qualifies as a "real Christian." But his words made my heart sink.

Why do people on my side of the political divide have such a hard time believing in God? Are religious progressives a contradiction in terms? I don't mean God as an abstraction—God as justice, God as love, God as your favorite ethical construct. You can be an atheist and uphold all these ideals, living honorably and well.

I was looking for more. Most of the time I was afraid to say it out loud, even to the people I interviewed.

Seek and ye shall find.

I was seeking reports and rumors, indications that God might still be at work in the world. I was searching for a God I could experience. If the same God could touch the lives of people with opposite beliefs, that might be the most persuasive evidence of all.

SELECTED ILLUSTRATIONS



Tent Revival in Clarksville, Tennessee



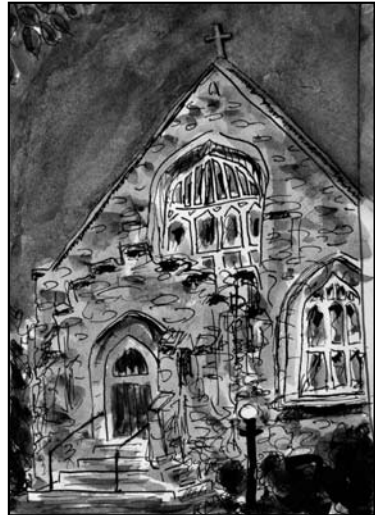
Father LeDoux with parishioners, New Orleans, Louisiana



Jay Bakker (right) with Matt Debenedictis, Atlanta, Georgia



Civil rights veteran Jerome Smith



Louisville Scenes