

Impressions of a Travelling Tent Revival - Greenfield, MA

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Essay #1-Observation of a Ritual
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As soon as I saw the flier in the parking lot of Big Y in Greenfield, I knew this was the ritual to attend. What caught my attention was the caption: "SALVATION - HEALING - MIRACLES" and below it "THE BLIND SEE - THE DEAF HEAR - THE LAME WALK." I was expecting hundreds of people sweating and exhorting the name of Jesus, like on TV, but it was a very New England crowd and very tame. The tent was by no means filled to capacity, and in many ways the service was like any other Christian gathering I had been to. However, there were distinct differences.

Description

The Tent

I arrived a bit after the service had begun, but it was still daylight. The tent was set up in the Franklin County Fairgrounds in Greenfield, just as it is in the photo on the flier. Beside the was parked the 18-wheeler truck with **REVIVAL CRUSADES** in red on the side, along with the slogan "SALVATION - HEALING - MIRACLES" and the names of the Evangelists. There were large flood lights pointing out into the parking lot that were turned on as it got dark. The tent was medium-sized - about the size of a wedding tent - made of a rusty-gold canvas with blue and red seams and re-inforcements on the inside.

Inside the tent there were four sections of wooden, metal and plastic chairs, seating for about 100 or so. The seats were by no means fully occupied, yet there were people on blankets behind the last row of seats and slightly outside the tent. There was a sound booth draped in red cloth in the center behind the seats. I sat outside the tent at the end of the left hand aisle.

The altar was set up like most churches, but the most significant thing was that there was no actual altar, no table used for the ceremony of the bread & wine that is normally the center of Christian worship. The altar area, or stage, as it more accurately should be called, was backed with a red curtain, hung from about head level. There were stands of speakers on the front of both sides of the stage. On the left was a large organ played standing up, on the right was a keyboard. Both of these were played by women who also sang. In the center of the stage, in the back, was a row of metal chairs with green plastic foam padding, like are seen in many restaurants. The preachers that were not speaking, and the "special singer" and guitar player sat on the chairs, but not all were occupied. Behind the young keyboardist was an electric fan, and behind the older organist was a basket of fake flowers.

The Audience

There were less than 100 people in the audience, most of whom were women in their 30's, senior citizens, and children under 10. There were few if any young people over the 10-12 age range, and very few young adults between 18 and 30. Almost all of the women were dressed very effeminately in long dresses or skirts (below knee length), and I saw at least 3 females (2 who may have been twins in their early 30's or late 20's and one girl of about 10) wearing denim jumpers with T-shirts underneath, white socks and Keds-style tennis shoes. Nearly all the women were with men (all of who seemed to be their husbands) and at least one child, though most seemed to have 2 or more children. The few women I saw that were not sitting with men were, I learned later, the wives of the musicians and preachers on stage.

On a blanket beside me was a group of 2 women and 1 man, all of whom appeared to be in their mid-20's. The man had a tatoo around his ankle, one woman had multiple piercings in her ears and a leather beaded pouch around her neck. All three were dressed much more casually and more contemporary than the other attendants I could see, and they left early.

The majority of the women who were dressed in more traditional "church clothes" wore makeup, had their hair fixed in elaborate buns and pony tails, and those with babies and small children spent a great deal of time walking around with them behind the tent. At around 9:30 many of the babies were crying and bored, and the women and big sisters spent more time outside the tent with them. Towards the end I noticed a girl of no more than 10 (the one mentioned previously as wearing

the denim-skirt "uniform") came towards the back with an infant on her hip. She was clearly used to taking care of the baby as she carried him easily and could hold him one handed while she picked up a chair and moved it further away from the row of seats. She sat and played with him in the back until I left. Only one man repeatedly took his children out of the tent to entertain them, one of the few non-white audience members with two small children of about 3 and 4.

The majority of the audience was white, which is not too unusual for this part of Western Massachusetts, though there was one family of African and/or Hispanic heritage and a few other African-Americans scattered around the audience. They did not seem to be discriminated against by the preacher's daughter whom I saw herding several children in and out of the tent, including the little girl of the Afro-Hispanic family.

The Preachers

There were three preachers that spoke at different instances during the service: the two featured Revivalist Evangelists, and a local Greenfield preacher who made it clear that although he was affiliated with one particular church in town, he was not limited or strictly loyal to the philosophies of that group. His role seemed to be merely that of a local contact person, and perhaps the person responsible for bringing the Revivalists to town. Within the service the only role he played was to encourage the locals to donate money at the end of the first hour of the service.

Evang. Stephen Reynolds Sr. was a balding, middle-aged man whose primary role in the service seemed to be to get everyone "warmed up" for the collection of money and to emphasize the unity of the group, despite the multi-denominational makeup of the audience. His focus was not on specific moral attitudes, but on the generally accepted "standard" beliefs of Christianity. He only spoke at the beginning of the service, before the local preacher and after to introduce the main speaker, Evang. James Reynolds, Sr.

The senior Evangelist was an enthusiastic man in his 60's, and very theatrical in his preaching style. The older Reynolds had what sounded like the typical well-educated upper class deep south accent. He was a slightly toned-down "fire and brimstone" type preacher, focusing on the Biblical events of the crucifixion, "real life" stories about sinners, visions of Hell, and "saving" members of the audience. He seemed to be the least concerned with alienating people with his specific view of what Christianity should be by making moralist statements about homosexuality, dancing and drugs, and illustrating the benefits of disciplinary beatings. He made it clear throughout the night that both he and his son Mark, the guitar player, had been great sinners in their pasts. He himself had been in the Marines and told a story about stealing a car at the age of 17 or 18 while in the Service. He also mentioned being beaten by his mother with a large stick. He seemed to not be upset by this, but rather approved of it.

In addition to the preachers there 4-6 young men, most of whom were dressed in white shirts, ties and dark pants, and were clearly part of the travelling Revival. They worked the sound booth, adjusted the tent flaps and acted as audience plants for the preachers to focus on. They probably also had some sort of security-guard role, as they constantly patrolled the outer edges of the tent. Occasionally they would sit with some of the women in dresses with babies.

The Service

I came late, so I can only guess that the younger of the two Revivalists, Steven Reynolds, Sr. spoke at length at the beginning of the service, as he was just finishing as I arrived. Then after a song with much audience participation (singing, arm waving, shouting and tambourine playing) the local Greenfield preacher, whose accent and speaking style sounded a great deal like Bill Clinton, took the stage. A microphone was used at all times by each of the speakers.

He made some vague statements and exhortations about how all of Massachusetts should be Christian, but denomination is irrelevant. After some very effective excited and tearful repentance and sorrowful asking for forgiveness with lots of audience agreement and participation, he quickly changed the tone of his preaching by saying it was "happy time." Cheerful wordless music started and he told everyone to stand up, at which point I noticed some of the assistant revivalists pulled baskets out from behind the organ.

Unlike most church services I've seen, the format of this collection involved the audience members coming up to the stage and putting a donation into the basket at the preacher's feet. The preacher asked that even if you don't have money, to put your hand over the basket and give "the gift of yourself" to the Lord. He was also careful to point out that checks were payable to the Deliverance Center. At this time it was also stated that tapes of the guitarist Mark Reynolds, clearly a relative of the preachers, were on sale.

After the collection, the stage was given back to the younger Reynolds man, who introduced the older one who was the main speaker of the night.

The theme of the evening's preaching seemed to be the metaphor of Jesus taking our beatings for us, which he illustrated with at least four different stories in which the perpetrator of a crime is relieved of punishment by another person. The older Reynolds preacher started his sermon with several stories comparing God and religion to the medical profession and doctors. His overall point was difficult to determine, though there was a great deal of verbal support from the audience.

Next he read from the King James edition of the Bible, judging by the "thee's," "thou's," and "-eth's." After the reading he asked his wife to pray. At this point the organist woman who had moved to the back, stood up directly in front of me. She was in her 60's with a grey beehive, wearing a fuschia dress, white jacket and white shoes. She started praying in a plaintive tearful voice, requesting that someone in the audience be born again that night, looking for one person to convert, asking God to "not let them leave" in a loud whine. As her voice got louder and more tearful her message became more & more vague. There was minimal audience affirmation of the "Amen" and "Praise Jesus" variety. Throughout her several minute speech, I could see that she was gesturing with her right hand, and her left was holding the upper arm of a small toddler of about one year whom she sat on the chair beside her when she stood. As she finished one of the denim-dressed women holding a baby of about 5 or 6 months came and sat beside her, passing the preacher's wife the younger baby and taking the older one onto her lap.

Then the preacher began a long confusing story about a Boston woman who was on "drugs," and her two sons who killed the boy who was selling her the drugs. The end result of the story was that although one brother actually killed the boy, the other brother went to prison in his place.

He began talking about having a "wrong heart" and "the law of sin" and "the devil using it to deceive me," however it was unclear whether or not this was part of the story about the two brothers or his own experiences, however, it elicited a great deal of audience response. Between the end of that story and the next, he quoted the Bible, specifically Paul, talked about sin being "black and hideous," briefly recounted the story of the Tree of Knowledge from Genesis and how this is the cause of all of the "evil, wicked nature we were all born with." He claimed that an example of this evil nature is the "evilest, filthiest sin is this homosexual society," but equated it with all sin saying "sin is sin and sin is death." At this, as there had been throughout, there was great audience response, shouting agreements, people waving arms in the air and praying.

He then described the vision of a preacher named William A. Warden who prayed for a vision of Hell, and was allowed by God to go to Hell in spirit only. He described in great detail the visions he saw there, acting out the various parts to much audience approval, ending with a re-enactment of Warden's vision of Judas roaring "Leave me alone!"

Next he told another near-death story of a man who was supposed to be hung at the tolling of a bell, but he was saved by the woman who loved him. She took advantage of the deafness of the bell-ringer, and hung onto the bell so that it didn't ring. Again he acted out her holding on to the bell and swinging and being shaken violently from side to side. Several times he repeated "the sentence was not executed," comparing the actions of the woman to those of Jesus. His grammar began to take a back seat as he shouted repeatedly to the audience "You was chosen!" Again, there was a great deal of audience responses, both verbal ("Thank you Jesus! Amen!") and non-verbal (hands waving in the air, heads bowed or thrown back in ecstasy.)

After he made the comparisons between these characters and Jesus, he began describing heaven in great detail, with the people chanting agreement and approval in a low monotone after each word, phrase, or sentence. He began pointing to the audience screaming that we are all sentenced to die. He then told an apparently irrelevant story about how his mother used to beat him with a stick with "splinters flying" in order to "straighten him out."

This seemed to lead into his description of the Crucifixion of Jesus, begining with a story about the Roman soldiers flogging Jesus with a whip or cat-o-nine tails and giving him "39 stripes" with it. Here again the preacher's voice became theatrically low and intense as he repeated the phrase "forgive them for they know not what they do" which is said by Jesus in the Bible once he is already on the cross. He then gave a very gory telling of the Crucifixion, which I am sure everyone in the audience had heard many many times. The focus of this retelling was the fact that Jesus was given 5 wounds which somehow corresponded to the letters G-R-A-C-E, which stand for "God's Riches At Christ's Expense." He repeated this phrase three to four times to audience clapping, calling out things like "What a Savior" and "Praise Jesus!"

After this, he again told a story that could not have taken place any more recently than the 1950's or 60's in which the school bully took a whipping in place of the boy who stole his own lunch. The story was rather poignant, but the preacher was sobbing and wailing, leaning on an audience member in the front row as he finished the story, and although this was the fourth story along the same theme, the audience still responded with much enthusiasm as the preacher continued crying and hugging the audience member, who may or may not have been one of his staff members. Many of the audience members, though some were Revivalist staff or family, had their heads down in prayer, and at this point Reynolds asked the rest to put their heads down as well. Most did, but I noticed his wife did not.

Reynolds "recovered" though still emotional, began asking the audience at large to be saved, for anyone who hadn't already been saved to do so. He claimed "I take the Savior's position tonight." After a few moments he said, again tearfully "Can't you see what he's done." He asked someone or everyone to "revive the fire, the spark of life." Then he began requesting that anyone there who was a "friend, a backslider, a cold and indifferent Christian" to raise their hands. He repeated this 2 times in the exact same words and tone of voice. After no response for several minutes, he began saying "quickly upwards, God's speaking to you" meaning himself in the "position" of Jesus. He emphasized that this was the "opportunity to be saved."

Finally, after a few people had raised their hands, he asked all who had done so to stand. They did reluctantly, including his wife, who had not had her hand raised. He then calls them to the "rail" of the stage, and about 9 people came to the front, mostly men, but a few women and at least one middle-aged husband-and-wife couple. His wife had gone to the organ and was playing a very sombre dirge-like tune as he made small comments to encourage people to come up, at one point saying "someday it will all end."

Next the preacher asked everyone who knew without a doubt they were ready for heaven to stand, but that anyone who had not been born again and saved should remain seated. He then called everyone not standing to the altar to be saved, and the musicians began playing and singing a song many in the audience knew, and they sang along also. After the song, he told everyone else to sit, and for everyone to pray with him in a call-and-response format. The prayer was short consisting of him saying "I will read the Bible," "I will pray," and "I will attend the house of God," and the audience repeating it back to him.

He asked us all to pray aloud, and his wife started making orgasmic prayer noises and expressions, there was more singing and arm-waving, and the preacher began his crying and wailing again as he prayed over the new converts.

Abruptly he stopped and thanked everyone for coming, told how glad he was that he had come from Virginia, and asked the new converts for their names and addresses so he can "send some material to help you." As this seemed to be nearing the end of the service, and the lateness of the hour, I left as they began singing again.

Analysis

The entire service seemed to have less of an effect than what the preachers were hoping. The energy level being put out by the preachers and other Revivalist members was not matched by that of the audience. I am not sure if this is because of the specific message being preached that the native New Englanders did not agree with, or if they were just not the right "type" of audience.

The audience was not silent, however, and it was clear that they were actively participating in the service, some more so than others. There were times when the responses seemed to approach what Reynolds was seeking, but at no point was there any threat of an audience member bursting into hysterics or having visions or anything that is described in some instances of tent revivals.

For the most part the audience seemed very much caught up in the ritual, especially during times when there was singing and praying out loud. I think the preachers all expected a larger turn-out, judging by the number of chairs set out, and more active audience participation when he was calling for people to be saved.

There were very few objects used in the service and really none that could be perceived as symbols relevant to the beliefs of the audience. The baskets used to collect the money at the beginning were small, wicker, and not lined with anything. There was nothing unusual in the way the preachers were dressed—all wore dress shirts, ties and dark pants.

The red curtains behind the stage could possibly be seen as significant, the color of the blood of Christ, perhaps, although I did not witness the ceremony of the bread and wine traditional to most Christian denominations. It is also possible that the travelling nature of the group, the starkness of the tent and stage, and the lack of symbols was meant to draw attention to the words and being spoken by the preachers, and intentionally avoid any symbolic images. Perhaps this is why the audience was not as taken away by the service as one might expect.

The largest symbol presented by the preacher was of himself as the Christ, which I think may have played a part in dampening the audience response. If he had been more believable as a Christ-figure, then perhaps there would have been more people willing to come to the altar to be saved. The impression I got of the older Reynolds preacher was of rather fanatical, narrow-minded, perhaps even violent men who could cry on command. Though I am not a Christian, I do not think this is many people's impression of Jesus.

I think that if I had been able to talk with audience members, specifically those who were in the group who were called to the altar to be saved, I might have gotten a better understanding of what the ritual meant to those who were actively participating. Very few people seemed unhappy to be there, or displeased with the service at large. Perhaps the people who went up to the altar were actually experiencing a life-altering moment, though I will never know.