



David's Web Wonder

Thoughts on Christianity and the Church

Mar 30 2007: A different kind of community

I've spent the past two weeks in my favorite town of Huntsville in a highly frustrating and disappointing effort for TOW, not that this is news, but I also spent a lot of time on the airplanes. American Airlines has a [magazine](#) in the seat pockets (and also in the terminal, free for the taking), and in the March 15 issue, there was an article about [Couch Tripping](#).

This is a society of people who like to travel, but want to experience a place on deeper, more authentic terms than the usual vacation-hotel-tourist-trap sort of deal. Members of the club make their homes available to other members to come and stay at some nominal (but far better than hotel and rental car) rate; use the couch or guest bedroom, eat representative food at the family table, and be guided to the sights by residents of the area, who know the ins and outs (and can maybe protect you from faux-pas). Once you join, you can look up contacts in an area you intend to visit and make arrangements. Of course, once you join, *you make your home available to other Couch-tripping tourists!*

So here's a world-wide network of predominantly young, unmarried, open-minded, adventurous people sharing a common interest who are willing to be intimate and sharing with each other to an unusual degree. Sound familiar? Well, perhaps the "young, unmarried, open-minded, and adventurous" sounds somewhat postmodern or emergent, but Christians are certainly supposed to share a common interest - our understanding of Reality, and a living relationship with Jesus - and [community](#) is often a feature of Christianity at its most authentic.

Now, how many of us evangelicals would be willing to share our couch with a brother?

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Via [SmartChristian](#), this [column](#) makes a useful point about large churches that I've overlooked. I'm not a fan of large churches, having been in a few and noting the dangerous tendency for the members to focus on the pastor (who usually has to have a pretty good charismatic personality in order to hold a large church together, like [Jerry Johnson](#)) than Jesus. But there's no question that large churches command resources to do *privately* what currently is done by the government, much to the regret of conservatives like myself. I suppose it is possible for groups of smaller churches to unite in loose associations for the same purposes, but these attempts, like our own

[Catalina Baptist Association](#), have less than good records for success.

That noted, and while agreeing that different church structures and sizes exist to suit different people's tastes, I still believe that the greatest motivation a Christian should have is to be part of the moving of the Holy Spirit and the direct work of God, and this is going to be far more likely (if also unfortunately rare) to be found at a small church than at a large church, which will tend to rely on its abundant human resources and not *need* God so much.

Mar 17 2007: Toxic pastors, and otherwise

Interesting stuff from [SmartChristian](#):

- [Jerry Johnson](#) is the pastor of a megachurch. I'm sure that he is a Christian, and his original intention was to serve the cause of Christ, but when his church became a "successful" (in terms of number of people and finances) megachurch, well, human nature asserts itself. Kind of like Ted Haggard, but not quite as sordid. Just as damaging to the kingdom.

I hope Element/Central never get *close* to this kind of "success".

- [Rick Warren](#) of megachurch Saddleback and Purpose-Driven fame seems to be a lightning rod for controversy. But this article ends on a very relevant point:

"Every church has to make the decision. ... Is it going to live for itself, or is it going to live for the world that Jesus died for?"

When asked if he thinks that some of these splits are actually because Christians themselves are indulgent and refusing to change, Warren said, "Oh, without a doubt."

And when asked if he blames them, he replied, "I do blame them."

This is where Central Baptist is right now. A few weeks ago, the Sunday Night Bible Study crowd watched a [Nooma](#) video, "Sunday", where Rob Bell makes some pointed remarks about our motivations in worship. This produced a defensive reaction. I think we need to be very careful that we don't end up choosing to indulge our own desires and refuse to change to reach outside.

Mar 09 2007: Living in Community

Community: As in Acts 2:43-47, a bunch of Christians living near or with each other, sharing life experiences in close quarters, holding possessions and resources jointly. Sounds wierd, doesn't it?

I just finished reading [Irresistible Revolution](#) by Shane Claiborne, at Jeremiah's suggestion. He now has our young people reading it, which they are in varying extents, because it is a rather interesting story by a rather interesting fellow in a rather interesting situation. [The Simple Way](#) is their community in Philadelphia. Their passion is primarily to respond to inner city poverty, although there is a significant pacifist emphasis. So here is a community that lives together in the name of Christ but with a particular set of issues they share



a passion for.



The Simple Way reminds me a lot about another Christian community established mid last century in Switzerland by one of my heroes, Francis Schaeffer. Recently, [SmartChristian](#) directed me to an [interview](#) with Swiss L'Abri director Gregory Lahery. [L'Abri](#) was created for the purpose of authentic Christian community, in a time when a traditional church culture in both America and Europe was failing to respond to a changing culture and the questions of young people (sounds familiar?). The focus of L'Abri was to give a solid apologetic and comprehensive worldview to young people, particularly students drifting about Europe. Because of Dr. Schaeffer's emphasis on the arts (as expressed in his book [How Should We Then Live](#)), L'Abri also focuses on applying the Christian worldview in the arts.

I also read that monasticism is reappearing in the West, as people dissatisfied with the traditional church model are looking to find something deeper, more real, more practical and life-enveloping. Perhaps this has been true in all ages, as the Catholic parish has ministered to the common people, most of whom are comfortable with a very minimal Christian experience (no, Baptists are *no* different), but the Orders are available to those who want to go deeper. Monasticism is by no means an antique, medieval phenomenon, for the Orders (e.g. [Franciscans](#) and [Benedictines](#)) are still present and quite active today. There are several monasteries and convents in the Tucson area; in fact, our highly-recognized [San Xavier del Bac](#) is operated by the Franciscans. Sounds to me, however, like [The New Monasticism](#) is not Catholic, necessarily, but nondenominational, even postmodern.



The postmodern or postevangelical (or "emergent") phenomenon appears to include a movement of people who are leaving the church to find Christ in authentic communities ([see here](#)). But this isn't new. Last week, some of us went to see Amazing Grace, the story of William Wilberforce. What was suggested in the movie but not explicitly made clear was Wilberforce's involvement with the [Clapham Sect](#), a group of believers that lived in community in the town of Clapham, near London. The primary idea was to live an authentic Christianity together, and one way (among others) that this desire expressed itself was a focus on the abolition of slavery.

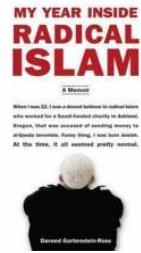


Some things to think about:

- God created us as social beings. Christians should be most in tune with what God created us to be. The more we live in community with each other (more than seeing each other an hour on Sunday morning), the more we fulfill our destinies as *real people*.
- How much you are willing to live in community (sharing houses, for instance) reflects your passion for Christ, and how much you can set aside your cultural prejudices (Americans are solitary, isolated people).
- These Christian communities often (always?) adopt a focus, or a shared interest that the people work together to affect the larger community: their city, their nation, their *world*.

Feb 26 2007: Ready with an Answer

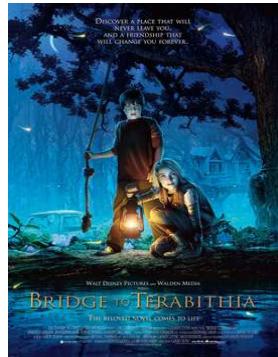
Thursday, this week, I was tuned in to the [Laura Ingraham Show](#) on my drive in to work. Laura was interviewing Daveed Gartenstein-Ross, author of [My Year Inside Radical Islam](#), who has a fascinating personal story. From what I recall hearing, he started life with his two "hippy Jewish" parents in Washington State, who were not observant Jews - they had a picture of Jesus in the living room, a statue of Buddha in the garden, and a very tolerant attitude about religious matters. In fact, they were affirming when Daveed chose to become a muslim as a young adult! In time, he joined a muslim "charity" representing the radical tradition, and gradually, he took on some characteristics of radical Islam. At some point, however, he left the organization to pursue legal studies, and, once free of the society and influence of his muslim friends, he began to re-think his religious decisions, came to understand that the Crucifixion and Resurrection of Christ make all the difference in the world, and became a Christian. So in a fairly short time, he was a Jew, then a muslim, and finally a Christian!



There is quite a bit more to his story (too bad Laura doesn't do transcripts of her interviews like Hugh does; it would be a keeper), but the thing that drew my attention is that Daveed's spiritual journey started when a young friend proposed the "Trilemma" to him:

"I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: I'm ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don't accept his claim to be God. That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic - on the level with the man who says he is a poached egg - or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse. You can shut him up for a fool, you can spit at him and kill him as a demon or you can fall at his feet and call him Lord and God, but let us not come with any patronising nonsense about his being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to."

[From another of my heroes, C. S. Lewis, as written in [Mere Christianity](#).]



The next day, my family and I went to see the film "Bridge to Terabithia", which turned out to be less a fantasy film (as suggested by the trailers we had seen) and more the imagination of two twelve-year-old children. At one point, Jess (the boy artist) has invited Leslie (the girl writer) to church. Very traditional, very church-culture. On the way home, Leslie asks if they really believe all that Jesus and the nails stuff. Jess' little sister responds that "God will damn you to hell if you don't believe the Bible." Leslie asks Jess, "Is that right?" Jess mumbles, "I guess so". Clearly,

Jess doesn't know what he believes, or why, and is unable to provide Leslie with anything that he himself doesn't have.

I would say this is a pretty good representation of young people emerging from our church-culture background. They don't know what they believe, and of course are not able to confidently offer it to their friends. In fact, they can't even defend their beliefs when challenged by a hostile world; no wonder that so many fall away when they leave home and the family's support of religious tradition is removed. And yes, this is primarily the fault of a church culture stuck in the last century that emphasizes nostalgia, traditional ritual, and behaviour rules over Truth, thereby both failing the children and rendering their parents unable to make a difference.

Yet there his hope! At least one young person is out there that has escaped from church culture, and he has some answers and the grace to offer them to his friends. Daveed Gartenstein-Ross has benefited from this confidence, and has a powerful testimony in his own right. Artists like Leslie need the same kind of confident friends.

Feb 12 2007: Why Churches Die

Years ago (mid '80s), when I was just starting out with the TI-99/4A, my dad and I joined a computer club, the Southwest 99ers TI Users Group. I stuck with that club for years, forming relationships with many of the members, most of whom were older than I. As time passed, M\$ Windows peeces became the dominant platform, and most of the SW99ers who were more practical ("what can I do with this computer") than idealists ("how can we support our little hobby machine") got their Windows peeces, but stayed in the club

- for the personal relationships they had formed with other members
- to continue to support their hobby computer

As time went by, the interest in the TI-99/4A, which was the original reason for the computer club, continued to die until only a few die-hards (including yours truly) were left. At this point, the group transitioned from being a computer club to being an investment club, and even that didn't last very long before the club disbanded altogether, ceasing to be a formal organization to a collection of cherished personal relationships. The SW99ers continue to get together near Christmas for a dinner at a restaurant or a potluck, and the conversation is 75% Windows peeces topics, 22% personal (e.g. showing pictures of grandkids), and 3% TI-99/4A related topics.

The club died because the reason for the club died.

Is this perhaps the principle behind the alarming trend for small Christian churches to die? Originally (hopefully), these churches were started with a mission: to be a Christian fellowship in a community, to be "salt and light" there, to be an outpost of the Kingdom. As time went by, they became more inwardly directed, to the relationships between members, or focused on mutual interests, like ethnicity, or a comfortable or nostalgic religious practice. Eventually, while theoretical concepts like "evangelism" and "Christian living" were regurgitated in Sunday School and sermons from the pulpit, there was no passion for the risen Christ, no moving of the Spirit, no interest in building up a relationship with God or the fellowship of the Kingdom. Just hanging out with your buddies, or enjoying favorite old hymns and piano playing and the comfortable routine of the

Sunday morning "worship" program. They became **religious clubs**.

It isn't at all surprising that religious clubs can't attract interest in changing communities. Who (besides other religious club devotees) wants to sit for an hour on Sunday morning, sing irrelevant old songs, and critique the delivery style of a sermon that nobody (except a frustrated pastor, perhaps) has any expectations of taking seriously? It's a joke, a bad joke, and contemporary American culture is tired of the joke.

A church dies because the reason for the church dies.

Now, at Central Baptist, we have just finished a Sunday School series on Churches in Transitions, in anticipation of Element's first Preview Service. In part, this was a start of an attempt in paradigm shift for our people, to get them to recognize the need to change. I sat in with the adult class, and mostly kept my mouth shut and simply observed. For the most part, there was dawning realization that we *do* need to change, and a willingness to undergo (at least limited) change. Partly for mere survival, partly in recognition of an obligation to more effectively serve God's kingdom. So I give them credit for willingness. But there is an undercurrent of **personal preference** in the attitudes of pretty much all our people; old, middle-age, youth. "*I want...*". "*I like...*". "*I am comfortable with...*". "*It meets my needs...*". I believe this is the root of the *religious club* syndrome: doing things because they appeal to our personal tastes. Old songs (and new choruses) are sung because "we like them" (nostalgia or cool chords) rather than because we are expressing our love to God or because the words reflect a commitment we are making to Him. It tickles me to have all the church people singing evangelical songs like "Rescue the Perishing" when they don't have the slightest inclination to do even the (misguided) traditional forms of evangelism. And that's just the music, but you get the idea - when we look for ways to please ourselves, rather than for opportunities to demonstrate our love for God, we are well on our way to becoming an irrelevant **religious club**. I'm hoping our experience with The Element will turn this trend around at Central, and given the general "willingness" of the people, I think I have reason to hope.

[Note: The "church as a club" principle applies more prevalently to small traditional churches, but not exclusively so. A big contemporary church can become a club if the focus moves off of Jesus and onto entertainment or supportive programs for young families and senior adults. I've been in a few churches like that.]

Feb 06 2007: The *Real* hope for Western Civilization

I've been thinking about a remark Josh made during his lecture last Friday: "The best hope for the culture are kids being homeschooled or in Christian schools." Or something to that effect. Partly I can see where he's coming from - one of his stronger points is that the previous generation grew up in an environment supportive of their beliefs, and homeschool or Christian private school kids will have that same benefit. But when you think about it deeper than the superficial "support is good," a different picture emerges.

First, most obviously, part of the problem **is** the previous generation who grew up in the supportive environment, and

failed to connect with their children, or at least instill strong convictions about their beliefs. Now, I don't think that the homeschooling parents are at any great risk of not connecting with their children, for necessary structural reasons, but I suspect both groups might have trouble with the "instill convictions" part.

"Having convictions" appears to not be something that can be taught by words. It is something that is produced by practice, and observing a model. It is important that parents connect with their children with the seven "A"s, but relationship by itself is not enough. I know some young people who enjoy very good relationships with their non-Christian parents, or with a single parent, even one living with a boyfriend or girlfriend. Guess what? That relationship is very good at communicating the values of the parent(s). To instill convictions about Christian beliefs, the parents must be convinced and convincing Christians themselves. Homeschooling parents, and parents who send their kids to private Christian schools, are very concerned about their kids learning stuff, both academics and theology, but they don't seem to have a lock on the "being a real Christian" concept any more than church-going parents who have their kids in public schools do.

I suspect both groups suffer from a siege mentality, and the false sense of security that a wall gives. "We've escaped from those corrupting public schools; everything is going to be all right now." They can then settle back in the supportive environment offered by their churches, which for the most part are not especially different than the churches that their parents grew up in. Sometimes, especially with homeschoolers, the siege mentality follows them into the church itself! I know several cases of homeschool parents who would not allow their children to be part of the youth ministry, lest those other kids be a corrupting influence! Divisions within the Body of Christ! What sort of convincing practical Christian model do these parents give to their children? Relationship, Bible teaching, and moral purity is not enough.

This is the second part of the problem as I see it, that kids that are isolated from the corrupting culture "out there" are also deprived of the opportunity to engage it. That "supporting environment" enjoyed by their parents became a crutch. When the culture entered the "Post-Christian" age, this older generation was ill-equipped to deal with it. The Apostles had much to say about persecution producing good character qualities, but the Church People in the West didn't experience much of it, and many of them want to shield their children from it, too. Christian "moderns" are largely unable to be "salt and light" in our post-modern world. It's quite possible that their sheltered children will be in the same boat.

I am told that the former youth pastor at my old church was angry with parents of homeschool or private school kids, because he wanted those kids to be witnessing and ministering in the public schools. I don't think this is the right attitude, both for the same kind of judgmental divisiveness that I saw going the other way from homeschool parents, but more so for the fact that very few Christian kids manage much in the way of witnessing and ministering in their schools. The influence pretty much goes all the other way. However, those ineffectual public school kids have ineffectual sheltered-background parents. What would happen if those parents considered Josh' conclusions, and committed themselves to doing something about it?

I think I have to disagree with my hero, Josh McDowell. [The](#)

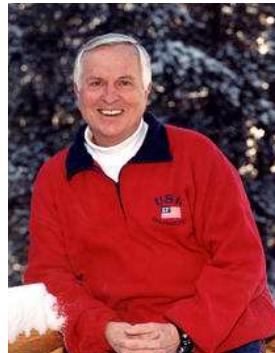
best hope for our world is really public school kids who are engaging their world with a convinced Christianity produced by strong relationships with their own convinced Christian parents who refuse to shelter them from the real world.

[Disclaimer: I have my children in a private Christian school. For many reasons, including the above, I have been reconsidering that decision. However, it would be a huge shock for private Christian school kids to enter Tucson Unified School District, and I don't think Mommy is amenable to the idea.]

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An update to my reflections on the attendance at the Josh McDowell lecture: Turns out that, due to a misunderstanding, the hosting church sent invitations only to area Christian schools and homeschool groups. So the parents of public school kids (who needed (and arguably could have profited from) the lecture the most didn't hear about it. Except as advertised separately by other people who did hear about it (like me) to parents of public school kids, who then declined to attend. So the lack of attendance was not *totally* the lack of concern.

Feb 03 2007: "Beyond Belief" Lecture by Josh McDowell



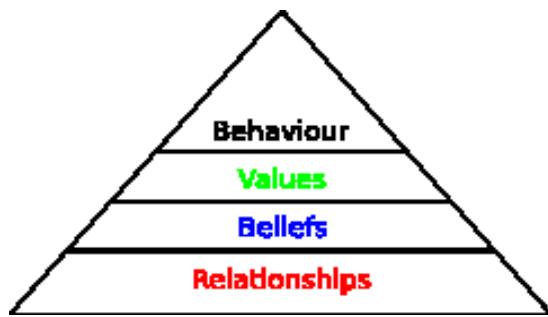
Josh is one of my heroes (and he is better-looking than [Francis Schaeffer](#)), so I was quite interested to learn from my children's school that he was coming to Tucson to do a lecture for parents. I advertised the event at Central (with no response, unfortunately), and Jerri got tickets for us from the school.

There were actually two events, one for teens and one for adults. My daughter Faith's entire school (all 150 of them) went earlier in the day. Apparently, Josh said a lot of things, but the only thing that registered with junior high people was the "sex talk". No surprise there.

The evening lecture was intended for parents of teens, to alert them (if they didn't already know) to the serious problem the Western church has on her hands.

- The behavioral difference between Christian and non-Christian teens in such areas as lying, cheating, substance abuse, and sexual activity has been declining for the past few decades, until now there is no discernable difference.
- The percentage of Christian teens who disbelieve in any absolute truth has also been rising. At this point, 91% of Christian teens would say there is no absolute truth outside of themselves.
- As a result, the rate of Christian young people who are leaving the church has also been increasing. Most Christian teens today abandon the Faith when they graduate from high school.

Josh presented his "hierarchy of belief" chart:



"Behaviour" is what we see, the attitudes about sex, violence, respect, all the things the older generation are outraged about, and declare that "we are just not teaching our young people properly" (how right they are!). But behaviour is driven by values, what the young people regard as important. And values are driven by beliefs. This is where it breaks down. Josh explained that we now have, not only two generations (old and young), but two cultures, with two different epistemologies.

- For older people, truth is *discovered*. Something is true whether anybody believes it is true or not.
- For young people, truth is *created*, a product of personal perspective and opinion. Hence the phrase currently in vogue: "It might be true for you, but it's not true for me."
- Older people believe: "If it is true, then it works". As a result, they view hypocrisy as a failure to live in accordance with the truth.
- Younger people believe: "If it works, then it is true". When they see hypocrisy, it serves as a disproof of the professed worldview - "it isn't true."

The problem is, contemporary culture reinforces this postmodern view of truth. Where the previous generation generally had their Judeo-Christian morality supported by schools, government, and popular culture, the current generation sees their faith actively attacked in their classrooms, in official government actions, and the media.

As a result, there is little the traditional church structure can do. A church has influence over young people for an hour or less a week. There's no way this influence can counteract the context in which the young people exist the rest of the week. There's not much even Christian schools can do to counter popular youth culture. **The only hope is for the older generation, particularly the parents, to have deep convictions about their faith, and to develop deep relationships with the young people.**

Part of the problem is that older people don't know **why** they believe what they profess to believe. "It's in the Bible," or "because I have faith" may be popular, spiritual-sounding reasons, but they are no better than what mormons or muslims say about their beliefs. They must have *solid answers* when young people, searching for support for their own beliefs, ask serious questions.

Josh gave a sample of some objective reasons to believe that Christianity is true:

- Do we have what was originally written?
 - Very little time from the events to the first copies. Hundreds of years from the events to the earliest copies of other ancient authorities (Tacitus, Caesar, Plato), but around 50 years for the New Testament.
 - A great number of early copies. Tens, at most hundreds of copies of other ancient writings (the Iliad

has 600+ copies); 24,000 early Greek copies of the New Testament. We can reconstruct the original writing with 99.5% certainty!

- Is what was written actually **true**?

- The biographers were eyewitnesses, not merely hearsay reporters
- They appealed to common knowledge held by even hostile contemporaries
- They *died* for what they declared. Some people may die for what they believe, but the Apostles would have known if it was a lie. Nobody dies for what they know is a lie!
- Their "good cause" died! Some people may die for a "good cause", but the Apostle's "good cause" was publicly crucified. There's no way to explain their commitment without the Resurrection!

The other part of the problem is that the older generation, **particularly fathers**, need to develop relationships with their children. Josh gave seven tips for parents, **especially fathers**, to develop good relationships with their children:

- Affirmation: Sympathy with a young person's emotions reinforces their sense of authenticity
- Acceptance: Sense of security
- Appreciation: Let them know that they are significant, that their actions and choices are worthwhile
- Availability: Young people define love as **TIME**
- Affection: verbal ("I love you"), and appropriate physical affection
- Approach their world: Recognize their choices and preferences - sports, hobbies, activities
- Accountability: Set boundaries, hold the young people responsible for observing them

The Josh McDowell Ministry had tables of resources, books and video courses. He also gave us the address of his ministry website, truefoundations.com, which provides a subset of the concepts he presented in the lecture. It was a great lecture, and I'm very grateful for the opportunity to have attended. Thank you, Josh, for coming to Tucson!

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The thing about this lecture, even though it was held at a fairly large church auditorium, it wasn't full. There was a very small sample of Christian parents from Tucson present. All the time I was listening to the lecture, I kept thinking,

Josh, what can I as a youth worker do, in a church where a lot of parents really *don't* care? Their convictions don't appear to go any further than Sunday morning. They might be interested in reasons for faith as an intellectual exercise, but they already don't seriously apply their Sunday School lesson to their lives. It bothers them when their kids mess up their lives ("behaviour"), but they really don't care what they believe. They desire that their kids find church "entertaining". They don't really seem to care if their young adults *do* walk away from their beliefs, as long as they have good jobs.

I see this in my church, and pretty much every other church I've visited (which is a fair number). Josh has a book, The Last Christian Generation. He says the *older people* may be the last Christian generation, if things are not turned around. I'm not sure that even *this* older generation is genuinely Christian!

Jan 30 2007: Religious Tourism in Huntsville

As a Raytheon engineer, I've traveled a bit around the country, and while some places are nicer than others, [Huntsville, Alabama](#), is my favorite place to visit by far. (Check out the [Wikipedia](#) entry, also.) Partly because of my affected affinity for Dixie, partly because the people are generally friendly and the climate agreeable (nothing like Tucson, of course), partly because it's so... well... *green*. I joke (partially) with my family that we will be moving there someday.

Usually when I go there, it is in the company of my workmates who don't really care to hang out with Christians at Wednesday Night Prayer Meeting. Sometimes, like last week, I go by myself, so in addition to doing some local sightseeing, I figured I would find a local church and pray with them, particularly for the exciting times coming up for the [Element](#). This was the motivation for my Religious Tourism experience, as I looked at the outsides (and sometimes the insides) of church buildings and met Alabama believers.

I started by poking around in Decatur, on the other side of the Tennessee River, across "Steamboat Bill" Memorial Bridge. It's bigger than I thought it would be, with a fair bit of industry, some beautiful historical neighborhoods, a nice park on the river (Mallard Point), and (something I always look for) a living downtown. Especially the Bank Street area. While I was poking around the downtown area, I saw two of Decatur's largest church buildings. But Decatur is a bit far away for a Wednesday night visit, so most of my explorations were done in the urban Huntsville area.

Note the heavy "Baptist" trend. Labels are useful. I don't know where a Presbyterian or Lutheran church would stand on the issues, or how serious they would be about Jesus, or if they were merely a social organization. There's no guarantee that a Baptist church would be different, but the chances are better. From what I could tell from the phone book, the edgier churches ([The Rock](#) or [Impact](#)) would (a) not be representative of Christian activity in Huntsville, and (b) tend to be Pentecostal or Charismatic. Not that there is anything *necessarily* wrong with that, but again, the chances of plain ol' Christianity, unadorned by controversy, are better with the "Baptist" label.

The Big

I'm not a fan of big churches. They may have their place, they certainly have resources (which occasionally are used for Kingdom work outside their own walls), they obviously appeal to certain kinds of people. However, they tend to hoard their resources for themselves, they promote an "entitlement" or "program-centric" ministry model among their people, and I think they get sidetracked with wasteful and internally-focused non-intentional activities like softball teams and bowling leagues. I think a lot of the stereotype that unbelievers have about Christianity comes from the "church culture" which is particularly visible in our larger churches. My main beef, though, is that the bigger an organization is, the more inertia it has, and a big church is far less likely to respond to God's call for a change of direction than a smaller church. All the same, the bigger churches are more visible, especially when you're just cruising around on Tuesday night, or browsing the phone book.

First Baptist, Decatur
[\(website\)](#)



Big. The church building itself takes up a city block near the corner of Bank Street and Church Street (probably the reason the street has its name). The parking lot is across the street, and is apparently insufficient; they have rules for parking on the street, for blocks away, and have a shuttle for those who park outside convenient walking distance. On Tuesday night, there was either a children's program or the tail end of daycare, but I snuck in and looked around. Found the auditorium: high arched ceiling, elaborate light fixtures, dark wooden pews, a large stage area with organ pipes and a three-story stained glass piece behind the baptistry. Lots of money in here. Otherwise, I snagged some visitor literature - a church guide and a "FAQ". Lots of programs for all ages. Like I said, big church culture.

Central Baptist, Decatur
[\(website\)](#)

I just looked at the outside. Not extremely big, had a no-nonsense attitude. They had acquired some buildings or houses nearby for their ministries, rather than do a flashy expensive (wasteful) building plan to replace their acquisitions with something matching the theme of their plant. I'm speculating, of course, but you can see where my values are. I appreciate efficiency and function over form, and for resources to be committed to something more eternal than bricks.

First Baptist, Huntsville
[\(website\)](#)



Big. Really Big. Sits on a big piece of downtown Huntsville. Their steeple/carillon is visible for miles, particularly lit up at night. Actually, I've visited here before, on a Wednesday night and a Sunday morning, years ago. Kinda formal. When I cruised by on Tuesday, some members of the handbell choir were coming out, and told me that the Wednesday meal started at 5:00, and yes, there is a prayer time at 5:45, but I gather that most people head off to choir practice or other activities. This would have been my fall-back plan, but I was holding out for something more... authentic.

Southside Baptist Church
[\(website\)](#)



I just peeked inside. A women's Bible seminar, not associated with the church, was going on, and the woman who stopped me at the door had no access to any literature from the church. Downtown, though. I'm partial to downtown churches, if they see their location as a calling, and more than just a destination for a drive from the suburbs. No idea if that's true in this case or not.

Whitesburg Baptist Church
[\(website\)](#)

Monstrous. Two campuses, the north one apparently houses a Christian school, and the south one (visible from my hotel on Memorial Parkway) seems to be the main plant. Inside the main door was a grand staircase, the cafe just beyond, and to the right was the Recreation Outreach center. None of the teens and older children running around knew anything about Wednesday night activities, so I tried the Rec Center. Several pool tables being used by cursing teenagers, some foosball tables, an enclosed area with exercise machines, and a desk manned by some students who were handing out cue sticks and monitoring the activity. I asked them if there were any Wednesday activities. They blinked at each other, and then one said, "I don't know. I'm in the Singles Ministry. A church so large that subcultures exist within it and are ignorant of each other.

Too big for my tastes.

[University Baptist Church \(website\)](#)

This would be a medium size church, about the size of First Southern Baptist in Tucson. On Wednesday night, their praise band practice was just winding down, and the older people, who usually participate in the prayer meeting, were gathering for a Sanctity of Life presentation. Some friendly old boys greeted me, told me what was going down, invited me to stay, and referred me to Woodland Hills.

The Small

While I have reasons to be suspicious of large churches, small churches are certainly not guaranteed to be bastions of simple faith. Small churches stay small (or disappear) for reasons, quite often a preference to NOT reach out and grow, or because someone or some group of (usually older) members want to stay in control. Small churches may avoid big-church inertia, but they often suffer from hard-heartedness. All the same, while big churches may "feel safe" for the risk-averse, small churches can be jewels waiting to be discovered.

[Central Baptist, Huntsville](#)

Small. Really small. Also in a bad neighborhood, surrounded by run-down apartments and dilapidated old homes. The building and grounds had an air of despair, but you can't tell much until you meet the people. As it was, they didn't meet until 7:00, so while I was somewhat inclined to bring Central Baptist Huntsville greetings from Central Baptist Tucson, I figured I'd keep looking.

[Bethel Bible Church](#)

I did go by in good faith, but there wasn't anybody there. I wasn't *exclusively* hung up on the "Baptist" label!

[West Huntsville Baptist Church \(website\)](#)



This was the most interesting of the lot. This fellowship was perhaps four blocks from Central, in more or less the same neighborhood, but with a much more hopeful "feel". Their marquee said the Wednesday prayer time was at noon, but the lights were on, so I stopped to check it out, and met pastor Scott Gossett outside, who explained what their church was about. They have

an influence in four counties, and widespread small-groups, including one meeting that evening at 6:00. WHBC replaced FBC as my fall-back. He also explained how they do short-term foreign mission trips, which is a good sign for a relatively small church. More interesting: There is a failing elementary school in the neighborhood, and WHBC members have given themselves to be mentors and tutors to the children, and support the teachers and staff with tokens such as a banquet. As a result, the school has improved almost to the point of going back above the failure line! Involvement in the local community (particularly a blighted one) gets high marks in my book.

Woodland Falls Baptist Church

This is where I ended up. Small fellowship, about as many members as Central Baptist Tucson, but with three times as much building. They were in their "gymnasium", preparing a birthday party for their pastor, Gary Lawson, and his wife Patsy. The old boys who greeted me were very friendly, and invited me to stay. I was really after a prayer meeting, but I also hadn't had dinner, so I stayed. Wonderful people, but strongly church-culture. What can I expect? I set myself up for it. Afterwards, Pastor Lawson gathered some of the men about and we prayed for Central Tucson and the Element, and for their own outreach in their community.

So there is my travelogue of my religious (Baptist, even) tourism in the Northern Alabama area. I quite enjoyed the chance by myself to visit an aspect of the Bible Belt that most Huntsville tourists *don't* see!

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One of my apologetic ideas is that Truth would have been around since the earliest times, and would not have gone out of fashion. On this premise, then, the only real contenders are Hinduism and Judeo-Christianity. Pagan religions like the worship of the Greek gods are not candidates for Truth, since those beliefs have died out. If the Greek gods were real, they would not have permitted their worship to be extinguished.

Well, guess what? The pagan Greek religion is back! [Check it out](#) (courtesy of [SmartChristian](#)). However, a characteristic of the Greek religion is that the gods were not shy at demonstrating their presence with lightning bolts and such. Modern pagans, who start things up as kind of a post-modernist hobby, can't claim such. Probably Wiccans have a better claim than hobby pagans.

Got comments? Email them to me at "dlormand at aztecfreenet dot org", and if I find them helpful, constructive, or illuminating, I will probably post them up.