

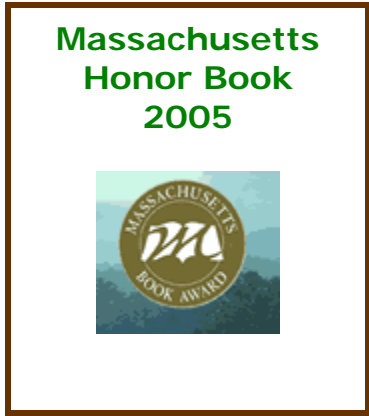
***Spirit and Flesh:
Life in a Fundamentalist Baptist Church***

by James M. Ault, Jr.

Alfred A. Knopf

A Reading and Discussion Guide

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Paul Pratt Memorial Library, Cohasset, MA



SUMMARY:

Why is new-right conservatism flourishing in America, transforming the political landscape? In order to gain insight into the growing influence of the Christian Right, sociologist James Ault spent three years studying the spiritual and cultural life of a fundamentalist Baptist church in Worcester, MA. Welcomed into the inner circle of the close-knit church he calls Shawmut River, the author immersed himself in church life, attending worship services, participating in Bible study groups, and mingling with fellow congregants at church dinners and other social events. In *Spirit and Flesh*, Ault is able to effectively elucidate the core values of new-right conservatism through his deep desire to understand and objectively portray Christian fundamentalism.

Fundamentalist Baptists believe that the moral absolutes of the Bible cannot be altered and blame secular humanists for ignoring or changing these sacred truths in order to meet individual needs. They believe that putting self above others, the “individualism” of the Liberal Left, is destroying traditional family life in America. The Christian Conservative movement demands that Americans meet family obligations, even if it infringes upon individual freedom. They believe alcoholism, abortion, homosexuality, feminism, and marital infidelity are social ills derived from the rampant growth of individualism.

Within the context of contemporary America, fundamentalism’s uncompromising adherence to a strict moral code and its condemnation of secular humanism is often viewed as extremist. Yet, Ault learned that when applied to the everyday life of the congregants, the Shawmut River faith community demonstrated a surprising flexibility in moral judgment, and provided unconditional support for church members struggling with marital infidelities, divorce, and alcohol and drug abuse. Through the day-to-day dramas of church politics and personal trials, a caring and devout church community is revealed. Shawmut River, Ault writes, was built on a system of mutual dependency, with congregants responsible for each other’s spiritual and financial support. Avidly opposed to government welfare programs, the members relied on a system of reciprocal giving and extended family and community support. In this spirit, groceries were given, cars

repaired, children cared for, spiritual counseling dispensed, and a community of close friendships and traditional morality revealed.

Perhaps the most compelling elements of the narrative are illuminated through Ault's personal interactions with Shawmut River's faith community. Aware that Ault had turned away from his own Methodist upbringing at a young age, the congregation was steadfast in its hope that through his worship at Shawmut River, he might once again embrace Christianity and be "saved." And, although his conversion didn't officially happen at Shawmut River, but later at the Community Church of San Diego, Ault credits his experience at Shawmut River for being the catalyst that sparked his faith renewal.

James Ault's research of Shawmut River first culminated in the production of his documentary film, *Born Again: Life in a Fundamentalist Baptist Church*, which won a Blue Ribbon at the American Film Festival and was broadcast as a national prime-time special on PBS. His research, conducted in the 1980's, is increasingly relevant today due to the escalating influence of the Conservative Right in 21st century American politics. Never has the schism between the Christian Right and Liberal Left been deeper, as both factions work to exert legislative influence over the issues of reproductive rights. Although reconciliation of such polarizing and divergent philosophies may remain illusive, Ault's research illustrates that the seeds of understanding can grow if nurtured by open-minded tolerance and respect.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. The shared fundamentalist mission of the Shawmut River congregants was to "save" church members from the eternal condemnation fated for those who choose "worldliness" – alcohol, drugs, adultery, etc. Mainline Christian denominations preach that all humans sin - but are saved by the grace of God's unconditional and forgiving love. Do you think that the difference between these two philosophies is significant?
2. Pastor Valenti believed that women's liberation could be wiped out overnight if Christian men fulfilled their scriptural role as husbands. What did he mean by this? What evidence supporting or contradicting this contention was present in the married lives of the Valentis, Strongs, Keeners, Sandersons, and Lavernes? Do you think that many American women would be willing to return to pre-ERA (Equal Rights Amendment) life in America? What do you view as the most significant changes to American family life due to the impact of feminism?
3. Christian Conservatives blame "individualism," "putting self above others," for undermining traditional family life because of the destructive effects of drug and alcohol abuse and adultery. Sexual freedom and abortion are hot button issues that have evoked militant reactions from fundamentalists in America and worldwide. Do you think that the growing schism between the conservative right and liberal left can be closed? Why or why not?

4. Fundamentalists believe that God and the Bible, not humans, should provide the moral blueprint for living. They blame secular humanists for altering moral authority to meet individual needs. This conflict increasingly permeates American public life through the political system, most visibly in the ongoing battle over *Roe v. Wade*. Do you think it is possible to reconcile profound religious and philosophical differences through the political process? Can moral issues be successfully legislated? How much of an influence are new-right conservatives having on American politics?
5. The oral transmission of church doctrine through preaching of scripture, Bible discussion groups and social communication was integral to the church life of Shawmut River. But oral communication frequently degenerated into gossip, resulting in serious division and strife among church members. Do you think that gossip is a natural outcome of life in a cloistered, close-knit community? What other factors contributed to church discord? What role did gossip play in the departure of Pastor Valenti from Shawmut River?
6. Committed to a system of reciprocal obligation, the Shawmut River church members were responsible for supporting each other spiritually and financially. How much do you think this mutual support structure contributed to family cohesiveness and stability? How does this targeted, selective financial support system compare with broader government-legislated welfare programs? What are the advantages or disadvantages?
7. For many Christians, Jesus Christ is the icon of social justice, representing humankind's obligation to care for those unable to care for themselves – the disadvantaged, disabled, and disenfranchised. Mainline Christian denominations are dedicated to assisting the poor and downtrodden worldwide. The narrow focus of Shawmut River's philanthropy, and its strong opposition to government welfare programs, indicates a rejection of the Christian call to an unconditional support of the helpless. Do you think that the failure to engage in a broad activist agenda for social justice is a weakness of Christian fundamentalism? Why, or why not?
8. Our world has become a global village made increasingly transparent by the dissemination of information through the news media. Do you think that this has exacerbated the conflicts between the Conservative Right and Liberal Left? Is it more difficult to "live and let live" in a world where so little is hidden from view?
9. Today, many parents worry about their children's unbridled exposure to the graphic sexual and violent content of mass media and the Internet. They also worry about easy access to alcohol and drugs. Do you think that Shawmut River's tightly controlled environment, and its model of church-school and Christian college education protected its children from the temptations of "worldliness"? What are the advantages or disadvantages of a restricted educational process?
10. How did getting to know the real life people of Shawmut River contribute to your perceptions of the fundamentalist Baptist faith? Were any of your pre-conceived stereotypes confirmed or dispelled?

BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

From the author's web site: <http://www.jamesault.com>



James Ault is an award-winning documentary filmmaker and scholar educated at Harvard College and Brandeis University. He studied social theory and phenomenology with Egon Bittner and comparative historical sociology with Barrington Moore before earning his Ph.D. in 1981 from Brandeis University's remarkable Department of Sociology. His first area of study was African politics and culture begun at the University of London's School of Oriental and African Studies. His first film, *BORN AGAIN: Life in a Fundamentalist Baptist Church*, won a Blue Ribbon at the American Film Festival and was broadcast as a national prime-time special on PBS, and on Channel 4 in the UK, and around the world. His book on that project, *Spirit and Flesh*, which tells the story of that film and the congregation it portrays while building a framework for understanding new right conservatism, was published by Knopf in September, 2004.

Dr. Ault is currently working on a series of documentary films exploring the changing nature of Christianity in Africa as it grows explosively in that part of the world and roots itself more authentically and confidently in local cultures. Another current project is an ongoing series of short documentaries on community institutions in his home town of Northampton, Massachusetts, funded by the Massachusetts Foundation for the Humanities. Called *Northampton's Living History Community Heritage Project*, its subjects include Family Court, a hospital emergency room, and a shoe shop. He has produced documentary programs for, among others, the Lilly Endowment, the Pew Charitable Trusts and the Episcopal Church Foundation, and recently held the William Spoelhof Chair for a visiting scholar at Calvin College where he taught documentary filmmaking.



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