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Jermiads For Hire:
An Ethnography of the
Televangelist "Community"

Eric Gardner

“Fire in each eye, and papers in each hand,
They rave, recite, and madden round the land.”

— *Alexander Pope*

Perhaps the most prolific and certainly the most public of the American culture's oral storytellers are the Televangelists — Christian evangelist ministers who have moved their message to television. When emotions are set aside, we can see the Televangelists as a distinct "community" whose stories and storytelling can be studied through ethnographic and linguistic methods. The basic form of sermon/story has traceable roots in the tradition of what Perry Miller and especially Sacvan Bercovitch described as the American jeremiad: the stories emphasize a religious errand that ends (or begins) with ideal faith (a faith that, according to Pat Robertson, many viewers "already have the beginnings of"); they combine anxiety and hope, and have close relationships with the written text of Christianity, the Bible. But the stories of the Televangelists contain some facets not included in the traditional Jeremiad — characteristics which we will term "the call," "the modern-day miracle," and "the pitch." All of these facets can be seen within three generally representative nation-audience Televangelists, Robertson (through his pseudo-news magazine show *The 700 Club*), Billy Graham (through his televised *Crusade*), and Jay Strack (a Jerry Falwell protege who guest preaches on *The Old-Time Gospel Hour*).

All of the Televangelists in the study design both their sermons and the stories within them in the tradition of the jeremiad: "the ritual of a culture on errand — which is to say, a culture based on a faith in process" (Bercovitch 23). Jerry Falwell introduces Jay Strack by saying that his message is one for "young people trying to find the way." And Strack, who is billed as a recovered drug and

alcohol addict, speaks a message of errand and “religious quest” as Bercovitch would call it (11); his theme, which is printed in text on the screen, is even one of journeying: “How to Shake off the Dust of Your Past.” Strack tells how he shook off his own dust — “a crumbling family,” “an alcoholic, abusive father,” and finally “track marks up and down my arm” — and found “the message of Jesus Christ.” Falwell is quite right, after Strack’s tale is done, to call this “victory over Satan” an “old, old story”; it is a motif that comes up again and again in the Televangelists. Pat Robertson’s pseudo-news story on Shirley Walker, “a woman who believed in miracles” is a story of her journey “to be worthy of the Lord and his healing.” Billy Graham actually tries to live this journey, touring on a worldwide “Crusade of Hope.”

In all of these appeals to viewers to “journey toward Christ,” the Televangelists are quick to point out that the viewers themselves are special, and this commentary from within is also typical of the jeremiad. Strack’s appeal is characteristic:

Some of you are sitting here and watching [pause] I know what it’s like [pause] drugs, physical abuse, emotional abuse, [pause] sexual abuse [long pause]. But thanks to Jesus Christ! I am a member of the Family of God! [pause] Listen to me, friend, you can be in the Family of God!

Here Strack attempts to get viewers to identify with him by sharing a litany of pains, by using that address “friend” (which is common to some Televangelists), and by portraying himself as “one of you” who has found happiness through the errand of faith.

The errand, as can be seen in Strack’s statement, is also one

Gardner: Jeremiads For Hire: An Ethnography of the Televangelist "Community that combines "both threat and hope" (10). Graham, in his long and somewhat sexist discussion of the American family says that:

Homes are in trouble . . . [there is currently] an attack of Satan. . . against the Christian home because the Christian home is the basic unit of our society and if it falls, then society is indeed in trouble . . .

Again using the "fellow Christian" approach, Graham combines the definite anxiety of Satanic attack and a society in trouble and contrasts it with the hope of Christianity — here the "Christian family." Jay Strack and especially the politically-oriented Pat Robertson also combine anxiety and hope in both their "stories" and their commentary. Robertson is especially interesting in his constant diatribes against communists. "It is a question," Robertson tells his audience,

of a fundamental difference in the treatment of human beings [pause] Is a person made in the image of Almighty God and therefore entitled to rights given them by the Creator or is a person a creation of the State's and therefore entitled to no rights except what the State gives it . . .

Robertson then goes into a discussion of what could happen if there were no "true Christians."

Essential not only to the combined sense of anxiety/hope but to the stories as a whole is the textual reference to the Bible, the text of "true Christians." Every Televangelist examined asked his/her viewers to read along in their Bibles. Billy Graham starts his ser-

mon/set of stories in the traditional way of the jeremiad (see, for example, John Cotton in Bercovitch 8), quoting and citing his "text" (for example, "My text for tonight is Matthew 24:36"). Graham's stories all relate back to his central text, and running through his sermon is his interpretation of his text. Robertson goes even further: he prints part of his text on a blackboard behind him after he cites it. He then takes viewers through the text step by step, all the while applying it to his story (in this case, the denial of Christ). Jay Strack's (and the other Falwell guest-preachers') use of text in his story is most prevalent. He opens his story with "If you have your Bibles please turn with me now . . ." and miraculously, a box appears in the lower right corner of the screen not only giving the text by chapter and verse but also by page number "in your Faith Partner Study Bible" which is available from Falwell's organization through mail-order.

The Televangelists seem to use this textual interplay mainly to give credence to their stories and beliefs: Strack said "the Bible says" no less than a dozen times in a fifteen minute sermon. Also, there appears to be a light encouragement for literacy within the Televangelists' stories. All speak "Standard English," but their English is almost always in some ways colored by their Southern origins — this can especially be seen in the rhythmic cadences (Southern Baptist style) that some Televangelists fall into when excited. By and large, they are "good" speakers — clearly understandable, exciting to watch, full of gestures and tonal/volume variations. They attempt to be accessible to a mass audience and so seem to attempt to take on not only the persona of a charismatic "Man-of-God" but also a literate, semi-intellectual. The concept of "studying" and/or "interpreting" the Bible also lends what can be perceived as an "intellec-

Gardner: Jeremiads For Hire: An Ethnography of the Televangelist "Communitual" element to the Televangelists and television Christianity. And the Bible is a long standing document emphasizing "errand."

To the concept of a unique Christian errand and the old-style jeremiad story, the Televangelists have added some "modern" characteristics. The three that appear most commonly we will call the "modern-day miracle," the "call," and the "pitch." The first of these, the "modern-day miracle," is central to the concept of modern-day errand — not only does it combine anxiety and hope but it gives a certain proximity, a "this-could-happen-to-you" element to the Televangelists' stories. Robertson's stories of "modern-day miracles" on the pseudo-news-magazine *700 Club* are among the most entertaining examples; he characteristically gives the audience a blurb like "and also tonight, the amazing story of a woman who believed in miracles" with a quick clip of car wreckage. The story of Shirley Walker is among the most interesting surveyed: 17 years ago, she was in an accident where her car flipped seven times. This introduction, along with suitable photos of car wreckage is followed by a catalogue of injuries, the most serious of which was in her hip. Her other injuries healed, but her hip injury was aggravated by a second and then a third accident. The screen then shows Walker today in an interview — "I never asked God to heal me — I didn't deserve it," she tells the audience. "I had a deep faith, but I was not yet living beyond material possessions — I was not yet living for the Lord." But one Sunday, a voice over a still photograph of Walker tells the audience, "Shirley Walker surrendered to the will of Jesus Christ." Walker again speaks:

That Sunday [pause] in January '88 God really spoke to me
[pause] on that day I just surrendered my heart [pause] said

'God, here I am' [long pause] people didn't believe me for 16 years when I said God would heal me . . .

The segment ends with Walker voicing over "God still heals today" as the viewers see her walking across a green park. "It's real, ladies and gentlemen," Pat Robertson immediately comments. From here, he goes into a discussion of this story and then builds around it with jeremiad-like remarks. One of Billy Graham's "modern-day miracles" is Sandra Tolbert, a college student who is confined to a wheelchair, but succeeds "because of her faith." Jay Strack, not content with the "modern-day miracle" of conversion he purports his own life to be, also speaks of his daughter, who is wracked with medical problems but through her suffering still manages to enjoy life. Most of the other Televangelists examined also used this "modern-day miracle" concept in one form or another.

The "call" is found in most Televangelists whose shows are televised church services/revivals, and viewers are encouraged to view the response to the "call" as a small "modern-day miracle" in its own right. The "call" is a group activity coming at the conclusion of the story. In Falwell's case, after his commentary on Strack's sermon, he simply tells audience members who have "felt the presence of the Lord today" to come to the front of the church. As the people move down, he continues a repetition of "come, come, come" until it is almost a subliminal prod. As this takes place, the toll-free number comes on the screen, encouraging viewers to share their response to the story they have heard. Graham does much the same thing. Vocal responses from the congregation are not usually encouraged, at least in the upper/"cultured" level of Televangelists catering to a national television audience (it is in some of the local

Gardner: Jeremiads For Hire: An Ethnography of the Televangelist "Community churches, and especially in locally televised black/inner city church services). The "call" seems to be a modified version of the old practice of "testifying," in which congregation members would vocalize their faith experiences. The modern "call" of the Televangelists serves to keep the focus on the Televangelists as both the figure of power in the story (next, of course, to God) as well as the storyteller. It also keeps the tone of the service under the control of the storyteller. Finally, it opens up possibilities for what will later be discussed as the "pitch" because when members in the actual congregation come forward, they are given "literature" on the Televangelist and his/her Christian beliefs, and when the television audience calls in, they are also given similar "information."

The "pitch," which has become one of the most known (and also most mocked) characteristics of the Televangelists, takes on many forms, only one of which is the dissemination of "information." All of these facets emphasize the Televangelists' never ending need for monetary support. Billy Graham tells his television viewers that, to continue his crusade to share Christianity with the world, "we need your prayers." He also tells them, "but, needless to say, we need an enormous amount of money, . . . we're counting on you!" Like all of the other major Televangelists, Graham flashes a toll-free phone number on the screen at intervals throughout his "story." Falwell is a bit more creative: he offers not only his newly-published life story, but also a combined audio cassette-text book home Bible college course, for sale to his viewers. And, of course, in addition to all of this and the above-mentioned *Faith Partner Study Bible*, traditional offerings are solicited. Pat Robertson is even a bit more creative — his *700 Club* is an actual organization with a newsletter, *Pat Robertson's Perspective*, that viewers can join. The

membership fees (\$15 minimum) per month support Robertson in his endeavors. Robertson, too, ends his pitch with “we’re counting on you;” like Graham, he is advancing the concept that monetary support of the Televangelist is a vital step in the errand of faith. The “pitch” also, like some of the characteristics above, reasserts the identity of the Televangelist as storyteller and controller (note, too, the language of “submitting yourself to the will of Jesus Christ”). Beyond these, some critics would argue, is the reason for the Televangelists (and, hence, the reason for their stories): they want money and jeremiad-style storytelling is a good way to get money. Regardless, the “pitch” is an identifiable element in the stories of the Televangelists.

With the “pitch,” as well as other modern-day modifications, the Televangelist community has molded the traditional Puritan jeremiad into a mass media storytelling style. The stories hold many of the characteristics that made the jeremiad a cultural form — stressing Christian errand as the purpose for their sermons/stories and an intrinsic concept of Christian identity, style, and duty. They also appeal to mass audiences — their English is covered lightly with an accent (almost always Southern) and add entertaining facets (“miracles” and some audience participation, as well as a quasi-intellectual aspect mixed in with emotional response). And, beyond their mass audience appeal (which has, in some cases like Jimmy Swaggert and Jim Bakker, turned against them in the wake of sex and monetary abuses of this appeal), they seem fascinated with power. This power is the power of the storyteller: Televangelists not only use the language of “submitting to Jesus Christ and Christianity,” but keep close control on both the content and interpretation of their stories, as well as the audience response to the stories. Indeed,

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Robertson reasons that his power comes directly from Christ:

Would Jesus Christ be on TV if He were here today? . . . you
bet He would! [pause] Jesus Christ is right here in our
control room . . . He's in our midst!

The irony in all of this is that, subtly, the Televangelists seem to
emphasize Christianity as story. What would they say if one as-
serted that, indeed, their stories were really the "Supreme Fiction"
and not just "modern-day jeremiads?"

A NOTE ON SOURCES

Cited television programs:

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Strack, Jay. "How to Shake off the Dust of Your Past." *The Old Time Gospel Hour with Jerry Falwell*. 19 March 1989. Atlanta: WTBS-TV.

Other cited work:

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Note:

In addition to the cited programs, I viewed several other episodes of *The 700 Club* and *The Old Time Gospel Hour*, as well as several hours of Chicago's religious channel, TV-38.