



Spirit and Flesh: Life in a Fundamentalist Baptist Church

James M. Ault Jr.

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In an attempt to understand the growing influence of the Christian Right, sociologist and documentary filmmaker James Ault spent three years inside the world of a Massachusetts fundamentalist church he encountered while studying a variety of new-right groups. He observed—and where possible participated in—the daily lives of the members of a church he calls Shawmut River. His book takes us into worship services, home Bible studies, youth events, men’s prayer breakfasts and Saturday work groups, after-Sunday-service family dinners, and bitter conflicts leading to a church split. He introduces us to the principal members of the congregation, as well as its shadow community of ex-members. We see how they respond to each other, to Ault as an unsaved newcomer, and to the outside world.

Ault draws our attention to how members use the Bible as a “handbook for life,” applying moral absolutes taken from it, more or less successfully, to both daily life and extraordinary events. We see how the congregation deals with issues around marriage, adultery, divorce, teenage pregnancy, and alcohol abuse. Ault makes clear how the church, embodying traditional extended-family life, provides the security of like-mindedness and community to its members. He also reveals the pervasive power of gossip to engender and perpetuate divisions and conflicts within a community. And finally, Ault describes his own surprising journey of discovery, revelation, and belief during, and in the wake of, his three years studying Shawmut River and making an intimate documentary about it.

Having experienced its life personally and in depth, James Ault is remarkably placed to guide us through the world of Christian fundamentalism—an abiding and, to many Americans, baffling phenomenon. In the course of telling his story, he builds a useful framework for better understanding the popular sources of both fundamentalism and new-right conservatism and their distinctive place in American life.

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